



# ALL GIFTS BESTOWED

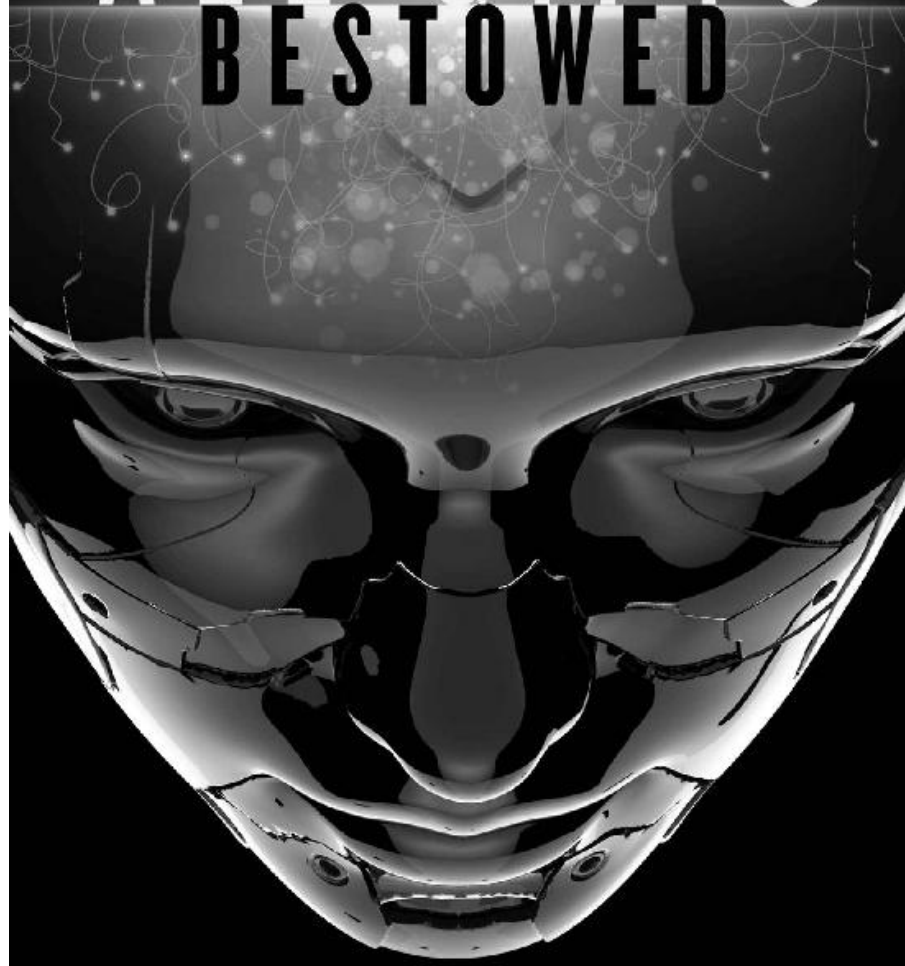


FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE COMMUNE SERIES

JOSHUA GAYOU

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**BESTOWED**



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**ALL GIFTS, BESTOWED**

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*This book is dedicated to the Future's Orphans*

## Part 1

The alarm chirped, disturbing his sleep gradually. It whispered to him through the fog, prodding gently like a cautious lover. When he didn't move, the alarm tried again, then insisted, and when that did not work, shouted as much as its little web of circuits would allow.

Gilles inhaled, slow and deep, rolling over onto his back as he rubbed his face, stretching languorously. He stared a moment at the bedroom ceiling as the alarm insisted. Eventually, he tired of the noise and rolled over to slap it back to silence. He yawned and rose.

The light was low and gray. He shuffled along the floor on bare feet to the water closet, shut the door, and turned on the light; a bright and hateful thing that reduced the features of the little room to flat, white noise. He found the toilet through squinted eyes, performed the task his body demanded, flushed, and exited.

He turned on the shower and turned the dial over to its hottest setting and then drifted over to the sink like an apparition while he waited for the water to warm. He squeezed a wad of toothpaste onto his brush, tapped the corner of the mirror, and began to scroll through the morning e-mail, eyes mechanically refocusing from his reflection to a list of spam, bold subject lines of unopened promises parading along the glass. He dragged his finger over the mirror as steam began to creep around him like a fog, searching for the list's beginning. Two or three items appeared to be of some importance... or at least important enough that they rated a passing glance before being sent to the trash bin. Interspersed between spam and hate mail, he saw the same subject line repeated at various points of the list: "URGENT—PLEASE READ IMMEDIATELY!"

He scoffed and deleted the entire inbox in a fit of rebellion. The random hate mail had long since ceased to bother him, and it seemed to him that no matter how far things advanced, there would always be spam-bots configured with the lamest of attention-getting methodologies.

Something buried deep within his mind found such a thought oddly comforting.

He tossed the app away with a gesture, disrobed, reduced the temperature of the shower with a word uttered to no one, stepped into the stall, and began to brush his teeth robotically.



He found Annalise downstairs in the kitchen, as he knew he must. She sat at the island on a stool, one smooth leg crossed over the other, munching thoughtfully on a bagel as she tapped at a tablet. It lay flat on the counter, and she leaned over it slightly, combating the glare of the kitchen window; the slow-rising sun skimmed a dazzling light over the surface of the Earth like a skipped stone, bathing the kitchen in golden brightness. It surrounded her in warmth, and she leaned toward that warmth unconsciously, like a cat. A single, red-tipped finger probed forward to the tablet's screen, alighting like a feline's hunting paw, sensitive whiskers spreading over the glass's invisible surface. She must have known he was there; he made no attempt to enter silently from the hall. She said nothing. Her neck stretched out so she could see around the glare of the sun, and with her hair pulled back, he saw the length and smoothness of it. Blonde hair stood out like burnished gold, and he smiled.

"Morning, Love," he said. He made for the refrigerator.

"Did you find my note...?"

"Yes," he laughed as he picked over some fruit in the crisper. "Black belt, black shoes. All handled." He pointed down at his belt as if providing evidence.

"You came home last night wearing a black belt and brown shoes. You think I was asleep, but I saw."

"Sneak..."

"It won't do, Baby. It's simply a no-no..."

Her voice trailed off, and he nearly didn't hear the last of her words. The television at the sink corner was on, blaring in its tone-deaf way about the long gyrations of the wide, wild world.

"How can you read with that thing on?" he asked. He let the refrigerator door swing shut.

She shrugged and tapped her tablet. "I like the noise."

"Well, yes, but must you have *all* the noise?"

A quadrant of talking heads on the television screen; piercing eyes, immaculate suits, yards of makeup and gallons of hairspray. They shouted over each other frequently, shook heads in frustration, hurled barbs. It all made Gilles feel queasy.

"What are they on about this time?" he asked.

"Something about China—there's breakfast for you, by the way. I scrambled up a couple of eggs; they're in the microwave. You can put them on your bagel with a little mayo."

"Oh... thank you, Hon, but you know I don't have much of an appetite in the morning..."

She gave him a look somehow both frustrated and adoring. "You're

too skinny, sweetie. Have the eggs.”

“Are you trying to fatten me up for the kill?”

“Always...”

He smiled, pulled one of the bagel halves she had left for him out of the toaster, and pressed down the lever to heat the remaining half. He returned the unused portion to the fridge while the shouting people on the TV continued to yell right past each other.

*“...a resolution from a toothless UN is worth less than nothing to the president—”*

*“Robin? Robin? Robin? Robin? Can I just interrupt, here? Robin? Excuse me? Excuuuse me? I think everyone on this panel knows... or I suppose I must amend that to 'should know'... that the Chinese president is a largely ceremonial office. If we're going to try to discuss this here, should we not at least proceed from a, er-um, baseline understanding? The, ah, common understanding that the General Secretary of the—”*

*“...Central Committee of the...”*

*“—Yes, as I was going to say, the Communist Party of—”*

*“—President, Secretary, or whatever else, they don't care!”*

*“Well, how can you say that, though, Margot?”*

*“They don't! They do not; they never have!”*

*“Can I interject something, here...?”*

*“Hang on a minute, I haven't finished!”*

*“Yes, I'm sure. I suspect you wouldn't finish given five minutes or fifty...”*

*“Roger...?”*

*“Alright, civility please, ladies and gentlemen, let's please maintain our topic...”*

*“Heh, 'civility,'” Gilles laughed. “They wouldn't recognize civility if it served them tea...”*

*“Look, the point is this: what assurances do we have that all these new satellites are for communication?”*

*“Oh, you mean outside of their exploding telecom market and the recent meetings they held with—”*

*“Let us not forget the Charleston Report, people, okay? Let's not forget the Charleston—”*

*“Look, David, you give me a nice, fat, paycheck and I'll find you any number of scientists and analysts that'll fashion any conclusion you like...”*

*“People? People? Hey, come now, people, can we for a moment? Just a moment, please, just a moment! We're all sidestepping a major point here. Suppose the report is correct? Suppose these are spy satellites or... and I can't believe I need to address this, yet such is the state of information today... or suppose these satellites are weaponized in direct violation of all the treaties already discussed? What exactly can the rest of the world do about it? Outside of the sanctions already mentioned?”*

*"Well, we can start by—"*

*"China owns twenty-eight percent of America's debt, not to mention that of the various other countries. What do you suggest? A sanction doesn't go through without America's say-so, everyone else in the union is so gutless..."*

*"Oh, dear, Margot, please..."*

*"Ugh, Peter, calm down. The point is that if we make a move on them, all they have to do is stop buying our debt. What are you left with, then, folks? An economic collapse! That's what..."*

"Do you, uh, do you mind if I turn this off, Anna?" Gilles muttered. He stared uneasily at the television as if it was a table of vivisected body parts.

She shrugged again and said, "Sure. I just had it on for noise. You're here now; I'll take your noise instead."

He smiled. "Quite romantic..."

"Oh, darling, I do think two years is enough to consider the honeymoon over, don't you?"

He switched the television off, rendering the kitchen suddenly close and intimate in the absence of all that clamor.

"It has not yet been two years... thirty seconds!" He said this last into empty space, and the microwave awoke to warm his eggs. He seemed to sense her eyes watching him; he turned to look at her and saw this was correct. She regarded him coolly, elbow propped on the counter, chin rested in hand. Her eyes were mischievous.

"What is it?" asked Gilles.

She shook her head. A smile threatened to break along her pink lips; lips thin like a ribbon with a doll's bow at the center. He saw her perfect teeth and understood that he might soon be making some form of reparation.

"Anna...?"

"Look at a calendar lately?" she chided. Her voice was light and dangerous. He could feel it in his tendons; she could transition either to amusement or hurt without warning. He was being tested. He wanted desperately not to fail but... she'd asked about the calendar...

His stomach sank. He jerked his phone from his pocket and tapped the screen a few times while she waited.

"Hah!" he crowed. "You're trying to trip me up! Our anniversary is next month!"

"But you have something planned, of course..." she smiled.

He froze. "Uh... yes?"

"Uh-huh."

Gilles sighed. "Look, how do you know that I'm not putting on an act to throw you off the scent?"

"You're not that clever, Babe. Don't worry, I'm not mad... yet. Just

remember, whatever we end up doing has to be even bigger now, since you haven't started planning yet."

"Yeah..." he said nervously. "Next month is rough, though. We're fielding a big upgrade. It'll be our biggest yet, spanning multiple cities..."

"That's fine," she said. She returned her attention to the tablet. "I didn't marry your job, sweetie, I married you."

"Yeah..." he repeated. In his mind, he began to run through options. Maybe he would ask around for ideas at work...

He was halfway through breakfast when the phone rang. Apologizing to Annalise, he tapped the screen.

"Hello?"

"Good morning, sir. Am I speaking with Doctor Gilles Guattari?"

"Yes, that's me. Who is this?"

"You live at 1951 La Borde Street?"

"Uh... yes?"

"Thank you, sir. My name is Emmanuel Parsons. I work for Anagnorisis Technologies; I'm the Legal Counsel here. I've been authorized to contact you on behalf of my employer to..."

Gilles sat down into his chair, the remainder of Emmanuel's sentence being lost to the ether. Anna saw the look on his face and whispered, "What?"

He waved a shaking hand at her and said, "I'm... I'm sorry, Mr. Parsons, would you please repeat that? Bad connection..."

"Yes, of course. As I was saying, we would like to contract your services as an outside consultant. I don't think I need to mention the obvious fact that you've become something of a name in a... field of interest aligning with our own, do I? We have something of a project we've been working for a while now, you see, and our management believes we're now at a point where it makes sense to... invite scrutiny from other respected members of the community."

Gilles nodded.

"Dr. Guattari? Are you still there, sir?"

"Yes! Yes, I'm sorry; blasted connection! Uh... Gilles will do fine, by the way..."

"Gilles...?" Anna whispered.

Eyes wide and disbelieving, he shook his head at her and giggled.

"I'm sorry, sir, did you say something?"

"No, sorry. Uh... might I ask the nature of this project?" He immediately wanted to kick himself. What an idiotic question!

"Unfortunately, sir, I cannot. Such details will be shared, obviously, but we must first see to the standard necessities. We have a few forms to sign, the usual round of NDAs..."

"When... when do you expect this all to occur?"

“We would like to fly you out tonight, sir.”

He deflated on the spot. “Oh... oh, dear. That's not going to be possible, Mr. Parsons. I'm terribly sorry—believe me, you have no idea how sorry I am—but I'm in the middle of a major release at my own company. There's a huge roll-out next month, and there's still so much to prepare. I couldn't possibly get away right now.”

“Ah. Yes, the new Voice upgrade, isn't it? Fascinating stuff, Doctor; I've been reading about it in the news.”

“Gilles, please...”

“Very well. At any rate... we'd anticipated that such might be the case. I, uh, I hope you don't mind—”

“And then there's also the fact that it could be construed as a conflict of interest,” Gilles said.

“Oh? How so?”

“Well... the overlap between our two companies? It seems a bit... uh... you know?”

He heard a vocal crackle over the signal that sounded suspiciously like a stifled laugh.

“I really don't think it will be a problem, Gilles.”

“Yes, well, even so, Mr. Parsons, I'm afraid I have to decline at this time; again, very painfully so. Is there any chance at all that this could be pushed out a few months? If the legalities can be satisfied, I would very much love to come out. Very much so.”

“I'm afraid not, sir. We are on a timeline, after all...”

Gilles hung his head and sighed quietly. “I understand. Please deliver my profound regrets as well as my gratitude for being considered.”

“Look, Doctor... Gilles,” the voice said. It was warm and kind, but there was still that laughter behind it. “There is a bit of time. Think it over, if you please, and if you change your mind, call me back at this number, okay?”

“Yes, of course,” Gilles said, slightly nauseous. “I'll do that.”

“Thank you. Good day, Gilles.”

“Goodbye...”

He set the phone down on the sink, sighed, and propped his chin on his knuckles. He stared at the black TV screen and shook his head.

“Baby... what is it?” Anna asked. She took his hand and scooted closer. She was beginning to worry.

Gilles opened his mouth to answer, but the phone rang again. He looked at the number and grunted. It was Reggie Josephson, the director of his department at work.

“Hey, Reggie.”

“Did they call you yet?”

“Did they... who...?”

"Anagnorisis, did they call yet?"

"Holy sh... yes, I just got off the phone with them. Reggie, what's this about?"

"It's been arranged for you to go contract with them for an undefined period of time—"

"Undefined! Reggie... what on Earth...?"

"Relax, Gilles. It's open-ended, so we'll bill it to admin travel and R&D. Take as much time as you need."

Annalise was now standing. He saw his own reflection in the TV across the room and understood why. He took a deep breath to calm himself, then rested a hand on her shoulder. He nodded slowly at her, and she sank back into her chair. He took another heavy breath and said, "Who will see to the Voice roll-out while I'm gone."

"It's not a problem, Gilles, I'll handle it personally in your absence. Besides, it's not like I can't call you if we get into trouble, right?"

Gilles shook his head slowly. The Director taking an active hand in a feature roll-out? Did such a thing actually happen?

"Reggie... what... how is this even...?"

"Let's leave it at that. I can't really discuss any details until you read through and sign all the NDA paperwork that the rest of us have already adopted. The most I can tell you at this time is... well, there'll be a big damned company picnic in your honor at some point, I should think. And... that's as much as I can say on the topic for now, I suppose, outside of noting that you're on loan to Anagnorisis until you wrap up... erm... those things they'd like your input on."

"Okay... okay..." Gilles said. His voice quivered, and he took a moment to clear his throat. "Uh... I'll, uh, I'll look into arranging a fl —"

"No worries," Reggie interrupted. "I have you booked on an afternoon flight. I've taken the liberty, um, of reserving two tickets for you. Just in case... you know."

"You're kidding."

"Well, your anniversary is coming up, Gilles. We don't know how long you'll be out there, yet. And... so, I'm well aware you guys never got your first honeymoon, what with work, and all. I thought maybe this could be like a second-first honeymoon or something? Might make this an easier sell with Anna."

"You snake, Reggie!" laughed Gilles.

"I know, I know. I am. But in the meantime, give her a kiss from me and pack your bags. If she can't go it's no problem; I think we can refund the ticket. But get her to go, Gilles. Get out and do something other than work, okay? Go have a little fun while you're out there."

"I will, Reggie." He looked at his wife, a smile pulling along his face of its own will, muscles working outside of his intent. It was as

though an impossible situation had worked out to the best possible outcome without the least bit of his effort... as it had. "Thank you, Reggie."

"Oh, no," his boss laughed. "Thank you, good sir."

Gilles hung up, set the phone on the counter, and laughed.

"Okay, big guy. Out with it," Anna demanded.

Grinning, he asked, "How do you feel about New York?"

She shrugged. "When?"

"Tonight."

"Toni—!"

Her voice had cut out before she could finish forming the word and her chin bounced silently as she tried to get sound moving again. Gilles laughed, stood from his chair, and kissed her, lips tightened through a smile. He pulled back and thumbed at a smudge of lipstick at the corner of her lip. He realized he was still laughing—realized he could not stop.

"What the hell?" she asked. "Baby, what's going on?"

"Anagnorisis Technologies wants me to come out and consult with them on some project they have going out there."

Her eyes widened considerably at this news. "You're kidding?"

"I'm not! That last call was Reggie; it's all been arranged. And the company got me two plane tickets, Baby, two! Come with me."

She scoffed and shook her head. "Gilles...what about my class? I can't just leave—"

He shook his head and began to bustle around the kitchen, putting various things away. He placed the toaster back into the cabinet and began to run the remainder of the scrambled eggs down the sink drain. He was still smiling, having given up all pretense of composure.

"We need to get packing, dear..." he giggled.

"You're not even listening. What do I tell my students?"

"You won't be able to; you'll have to send them an e-mail from the plane, I imagine."

"Gilles!"

He stopped and looked at her. Two hot points of color stood out on her cheeks. He gently set the last of the dishes into the sink and said, "Sorry..."

"I can't just dump them in the middle of the semester, okay? There's a certain responsibility there."

"What about your TA?"

"Brenda? What about her?"

He came around the edge of the sink and sat down in the chair next to hers. Taking her hands in his, he said, "You're a professor now, Anna. Don't you remember what it was like in school? They don't teach a damned thing! The TA did all the work so the Prof. could

spend all of his or her time getting published. This is how academia works!"

"Not in my class," she said in a flat voice.

"Oh, you're not allowed to use Brenda in that fashion?"

"No, I mean not in my class, Gilles. I remember how it was as well as you do, okay? I just don't want to do that."

"Anna?"

"Gilles?"

"Anna...look. Can't...can't they read some dusty old English Lit without you watching over them?"

"Dusty old...?"

"Sorry! Sorry, that came out wrong!"

She stood and moved to the other side of the kitchen, and he knew he had blundered horribly.

"I'm sorry..." he repeated and hung his head.

"Look... my job might not seem that big or impressive to you, and maybe it's not, but it's important to me. You don't get to shit on my work just because it doesn't match—"

He held up his hands in submission. "I'm sorry, Anna, honestly. It's not what I meant at all."

"What did you mean, then?"

He sighed. "Honey...you never got to have your honeymoon. And I know what that meant to you; you tried to hide it from me, but I saw it. For one, the timing was awful as far as work was concerned, but even then we couldn't afford it. We can now, of course, but back then? So much has happened in two years, Anna; they went by so fast, I think we hardly even noticed them. And we can have it now—right now. If we wait until the timing is better...well, who the hell knows when that's going to be?"

She had gone silent as he spoke. Her arms were crossed under her breasts, and she stared down at the floor, chewing at her lip. He thought he saw her nodding, but it was slight.

"Look, it's open-ended, right? But it doesn't have to be open-ended for you. You don't have to stay out there the whole time with me...in fact, you might not have to fly out with me today, though I hope you will. I guess we'd just have to eat the price of the ticket. But you could be home in a week or a few days or...I don't know, whenever you need to be home."

He approached her carefully, sensing as he did that the danger had passed; that she would again allow his touch. He ran a finger down the bend of her shoulder and ducked his head low. Finally, she met his gaze.

"Come with me, Anna. Tell them some sort of last-minute emergency came up. It's hardly a lie, is it? Come to New York with



me. Let's go somewhere, huh? Baby, let's go have a honeymoon."

"You'll just be working the whole time," she muttered.

"I won't. I will not. Yes, I'll be working while we're there, but the nights belong to you. You can get out and see museums, see the sights; in fact, you can go find all the wonderful things there are to see and then take me back in the evening, being the cultured woman of experience to my novice cluelessness."

The way in which she chewed at her bottom lip changed subtly. He could see the corner pulling back; saw a dimple form just behind it. He had a notion she was coming around and began to smile.

"Annalise...please come with me. Please, I'm useless without you; you know I can't be trusted on my own. I'll fall down a well or something."

She snorted softly and butted her forehead against his. "Pass me the phone," she smiled.

When they arrived at the airport and checked in at the counter, Gilles discovered that two first-class tickets had been reserved in their names. He contemplated keeping such news a secret until it was time to board, but she saw the look in his eyes when he joined her at the security gate, of course. When she asked what had him so chipper, he handed her ticket over and she glanced at it briefly before looking back at him with wide eyes.

“Who set this up? Your company or theirs?” she whispered.

“Mine, I suspect. Reggie said that he’d arranged the flight.”

“Remind me to send Reggie some flowers...” she giggled.

“Oh, excuse me?” Gilles laughed. “I might have had something to do with it, don’t you think?”

She cocked her head. “Such as?”

“Well, my dear, one of *my stature*? Wouldn’t you think I warrant the treatment?”

“Don’t joke like that,” she said through twisted lips. “It’s not attractive.”

He laughed it off but wondered deep inside if he had spoken completely in jest. And just what was wrong with supposing he had earned a perk or two along the way? There had certainly been plenty of ninety-hour work weeks in recent history. Why not cash in a little on the notoriety? It was nicer by far than hearing his name dragged through the mud by all the crazies in the news, at least.

They were ushered onto the 777 after those families with small children and the infirm. Anna counted off three rows until she found their seats along the port side of the fuselage. She stood looking at the seats for a moment while Gilles pressed their carry-on baggage into the overhead bin; a few passengers muttered in annoyance as they shuffled by. What they had by the window could not properly be referred to as seats. More like “couches;” there were two of them taking up as much space as any four coach seats, with a high partition wall wrapping around their perimeter. She saw an additional wall dividing the couches they would share, though it had been retracted back so the window seat could be accessed.

“Oh my God!” Anna said and began to laugh hysterically. Some more passengers had backed up behind her and one of the attendants up by the forward galley asked her to please take her seat. She

blushed and ducked into the window seat with her eyes cast downward.

Grinning, Gilles settled into the aisle seat beside her, marveling at its comfort and the sprawling leg room. There was a bin in front of him at the other end of his cubicle that looked purpose-made to hold his laptop bag. He leaned forward to stow it and then laughed as his wife had when he realized he could not physically reach the bin without getting up from his seat. As he hunkered before the bin, he got a closer look at the black wide-screen monitor set into the partition wall (larger than the TV he'd owned in college), saw the padded platform beneath it, and examined the gap between that platform and his seat. Understanding what the configuration must mean, he glanced back at Anna over his shoulder and said, "These things convert into beds!"

"Get out!"

"No, I'm serious, look!" He touched over the controls of her chair for a few moments before he found the button to recline the seat-back and pressed it. Instead of the backrest reclining, the seat slid forward until it joined the footrest far on the other side of her cubicle. She was prone and laughing again. Other passengers glanced down at her as they passed, some of them bemused while others smiled at her unfiltered glee. These passing expressions on strange faces only incited her further, and she was soon gasping for breath. When she had herself under control a moment later, she reset her seat to its upright position at the request of the same attendant who had called out to her earlier.

"Now, are you two going to be a problem?" she asked kindly. She wore a smirk that looked like breaking away from her control in a most unprofessional manner.

"No, ma'am," Gilles smiled, and Anna put a hand over her mouth to stifle the slight grunting buried in her throat.

"First time on this end of the plane, you guys?"

They nodded happily.

Then her smile really did break forth, and it was as attractive and welcome as they both felt. Her lipstick was perfect, and the set of her teeth so flawless Anna thought they must have been constructed by an artist. She lowered her voice and said, "Wait till you try the meal. Listen, you guys, drinks are free but take care, okay? It's easy to lose track your first time out." She glanced back over her shoulder as though confirming she was not overheard. Gilles wondered if she was violating some sort of corporate policy but found he did not mind. He imagined her job consisted, sometimes, of a long line of entitled asses.

He nodded to her and in all seriousness said, "We'll be fine. We're not heavy drinkers."

The attendant (her name tag said “Melody”) nodded and advised them to wave if they lacked for anything at all.

They departed not long after, and when they heard the soft chime denoting the ten-thousand-foot mark, Gilles was shocked at how quickly it had come. He had flown in recent years, yet the 737s he frequented always took longer than this to find cruising altitude. The swept-back wings of the aircraft sliced through the sky like razors with hardly a jostle, and he wondered if it was just good weather or if the aerodynamics of the plane were really as impressive as he had read. It rocked gently beneath his body as if it were a platform on a slow-moving gimbal, and his eyes began to droop despite his excitement.

A moment later he heard the clack and clatter of numerous bags being unfastened, of trays being lowered, and chairs adjusted; the sound washed through the cabin like a breaking wave. He caught his wife’s eye at this signal, who had until recently been staring through her window in rapture, and they spent the next twenty minutes or so playing with their seat controls like children.

The first portion of this activity was dedicated to toggling each other’s overhead light; abandoned as soon as they realized the flashing might annoy their neighbors. Anna graduated to systematically inflating and deflating the air bladders in her backrest until she achieved the perfect amount of lumbar support. On his armrest, Gilles discovered a black square of plastic about as large as two credit cards laid side by side. There was a picture of an old-fashioned pointer device on its surface. He looked closer and found the declivity along the panel’s edge that, when pushed, folded the panel out of sight, exposing a muted-gray touch-pad. As soon as he discovered this, the display beyond his outstretched feet ignited in a ballet of twirling colors and pleasing imagery. The words “Try me...” were shown along the bottom, so he touched the panel under his hand with a fingertip. The swirling hues coalesced into an interface menu offering such services as movies, television, games, books, and so on.

“Hey, Anna, check this out,” he said with a smile. She leaned forward to see around the retracted partition wall and noted what he was doing.

“Very nice,” she said.

“Isn’t it?” he agreed. “Care for a little TV, *my darling*?”

“Oh, certainly, *Lovey*,” she joked in the drawn-out guise of the obnoxious aristocrat. “Do let’s see if they have...the arts.”

He began to tap through a few channels, the content of each being previewed in the main window as it was highlighted. He reached the domestic news stations, and two channels after was greeted by the image of his own face looking back at him. He stopped scrolling for a

moment and stared.

“Babe...” Anna said. The amusement in her voice had died. She looked up at him and saw the worry lines returned to their familiar places. Eyes stricken and hurt.

Slowly, as though controlled by an external intelligence, his hand rose to set the bud of an earphone into his left ear while he tapped another control on his armrest. He waited a moment, then sagged.

Anna fumbled with the panel in her own armrest, cursing under her breath before discovering how to retract the cover, and was searching for the channel a moment later. When she found it, she inserted her own earbud and listened.

The news was not good. Protests had broken out in Washington, with an organized mass-march at the center of the fray peopled mostly, it seemed, with various privacy advocacy groups. She watched for a few moments more as a man she thought might be the head of the ACLU was displayed within an inset picture, decrying the abuses and violations of the Guardian Program and shouting angrily about the latest mask laws currently under congressional debate. The growing wave of cities adopting the technology; the further alarm over the coming deployment of the Voice upgrade. His image was soon supplanted by footage from one of Gilles’s interviews from over a year ago where the extremist Phillip Armitage had famously attacked him with, of all things, a phallus caked in human excrement.

The larger picture switched to a scene of screaming people being rounded up and hauled away by police officers dressed in riot gear. At the bottom of the screen, she saw the text, “Earlier Today...”

“I imagine they’ll start calling the house again...” Gilles said quietly.

“But we changed the number...” she muttered.

“They’ll find it. They always do. I suppose it’s high time I cancel the land line altogether. Superfluous service, really...”

“Gilles? Gilles, turn it off, Honey.”

“It’s okay...”

“No, it’s not okay. Turn it off; I don’t want to see it.”

He glanced at her, then looked around the cabin. Some of the other passengers nearby were looking at him curiously, perhaps recognizing his face mirrored on his own seat-back display. Perhaps they were watching the same channel at their own seats, even now.

“Alright,” he said and exited to the main screen. Then he closed the cover of the mouse panel. The screen went dark, replacing the image of his face with the reflection of his face. He lowered his head and sighed.

Anna’s hand crept around the partition and found his. “Are you okay?”

"Oh, sure," he nodded. "Just par for the course."

"Can we watch a movie?" she tried.

"Yes, of course." He reclined his seat fully, and when she followed suit soon after, they discovered that they were no longer separated by the stump of the divider. They looked each other in the eye for a moment and then she leaned across the gap and kissed him softly.

"Sorry..." he whispered.

She shook her head and kissed him again.

They dimmed their lights, and Anna found the least insulting film she could (a task that seemed of increasing difficulty as the industry progressed each year). Holding hands, they watched a comedy devoid of all personality for fifteen minutes or so before Anna finally drifted off to sleep, her last reserve of energy having been expended in the day's excitement. Gilles waited for a while to ensure she was all the way out before extracting his hand. He dug through the overhead bin until he found a cellophane-wrapped blanket resplendent in airline livery and, removing it from its packaging, unfolded it. He draped it over his wife, retrieved his tablet from the laptop bag, and returned the couch to an upright position. A few seconds later he was connected to the cabin network and perusing the initial volley of e-mail from Anagnorisis. There appeared to be five of them interspersed throughout the stack of spam, interview requests, accusations, and absolutions. Some of these were standard boilerplate messages; "*Welcome to the family!*" and so on and so forth in various superficial degree. He thumbed through these absently in search of meat.

The final message they had sent contained what he sought. Here was the initial Non-Disclosure Agreement he was to read through and sign before even stepping foot within corporate headquarters. He parsed carefully through its content, looking for any hint regarding what he now flew to discover.

It was as imprecise in its precision as any legal document he had ever considered, at once excruciatingly detailed and confounding in its total lack of meaning, until, he thought, he might very well be signing over the rights to the next decade's worth of his labors. He chewed through it laboriously at least four times, finding when he was done that he perhaps understood less than when he had begun.

He scoffed, shook his head, and tapped the box that would apply his consent to the document. Then he opened a browser and began to scour the internet for anything he could find relating to Anagnorisis Technologies, LLC, most notably anything appearing to overlap with his own recent developments in the fields of emergent AI research, deep learning, pattern recognition or extrapolation, and adaptive artificial neural networks. There seemed to exist a few hopeful articles. However, they were just as careful about their IP as was his

own company, so there was very little to sink his teeth into. He began to look at articles regarding recent stock market activity, searching for any clues as to areas in which Anagnorisis might recently have directed its interests.

The attendants started taking dinner orders up and down the aisles when he stumbled upon a recording of an old TED Talk, now some fifteen years old, in which a middle-aged engineer, Kevin Roth, discussed the importance of carbon nanotubes in the coming era; the massive industry shift to be engendered by the advent of an economical and bountiful production process for these perfect little structures.

Kevin Roth, who was now, as luck would have it, the Chief Technical Officer of Anagnorisis Technologies, LLC.

Gilles spent some time thinking about this—trying to understand how such a technology might impact his own field—but he soon found that whatever he imagined amounted to little more than what the engineers in his department called a W.A.G (wild-ass guess). He was distracted from his train of thought when Melody leaned respectfully into his area and quietly asked what he preferred for dinner.

He nudged Annalise gently until she stirred and looked about bleary-eyed at her surroundings. She seemed to be shocked to find herself sleeping fully prone on an airplane.

“Wha-izzit...?” she mumbled.

“Dinner, Hon.” He passed her a menu and asked, “Do you know what you might drink?”

“Gimme a min...” she said, bringing her seat up.

Gilles nodded at the attendant, who said, “I’ll come back in a few minutes.”

“How long was I out?” Anna yawned.

“Not so long...” He glanced at his tablet. “Close to an hour. Hungry?”

“Starving!”

“Oh, well good. Have a look and see what sounds tasty.”

“How was the movie?” She yawned again.

“It was very sweet. They became romantically involved despite all of the circumstances conspiring to keep them apart...uh, then around the second act there was some contrivance of plot to drive them apart, and then at the end, they reunited and lived happily ever after.”

“Turned it off, huh?”

“Indeed.”

She snorted, opened the menu, and after reading for a few moments, whistled gently.

“Indeed...” Gilles repeated, having opened his own menu.

Melody came back not long after, and Anna ordered halibut with

rice pilaf while Gilles limited himself to a simple salad. They both had a glass of white wine with their meal, pronouncing all to be excellent, though in truth it was merely adequate by any rational standard. Enjoying these things as opposed to the regular array of cattle-class peanuts, fossilized cookies, and flavorless cold sandwiches—in other words, those things with which they had, until only recently, an exclusive knowledge—at thirty-five thousand feet seemed to elevate the experience, if only psychologically.

In time, Gilles had his plate taken away and was scrubbing his hands with a hot towel while Anna still worked daintily at her supper. He pulled his tablet from the pocket of his armrest and began to peruse the last page he had left open.

“What’cha got there?” asked Annalise.

“Hmm?”

“Your tablet. Anything good?”

“Ah...I don’t know...” he muttered and fell silent.

“Did you eat your brownie?”

“Mmm...”

“Honey?”

He put the tablet down. “What?”

“Your brownie, Honey. Did you eat it?”

“Oh, no. Thought I might save it.”

He went back to reading. He made it perhaps two more sentences down the page when he saw her hand creep stealthily around the divider wall like a lovely pink spider. It began to pinch at the fabric of his pant leg and tug gently in furtive little jerks.

His mouth contorted into a smile despite his best efforts to resist. Reaching over to the armrest, he retrieved the brownie, still wrapped in its packaging, and slowly brushed it against the knuckles of that softly tugging hand. It froze briefly and then latched onto the brownie like the snapping jaws of a saltwater crocodile. Her hand retreated back around the divider, the doomed brownie already an abandoned possibility in his mind.

A moment later he heard the packaging crinkle and then, through a demure mouthful, the voice of his love muttered, “Thank you.”

He nodded and continued to read.

“You know...it won’t be just me that you have to share with one day. At some point, you’ll have to choose.”

“Mmm...”

“Honey?”

“Mmm?”

“I said you’ll have to choose.”

Gilles lowered the tablet again and thought for a moment. “What are you talking about?”



“Your brownie. I was saying that someday you’ll have to choose who to give it too...” She let the thought hang.

He worked it over for a moment before his face fell. “Good sweet Jesus...you’re not saying you’re...?”

“No,” she answered quickly, a little alarmed. “No, I was just saying at some point we might... you know?”

Gilles took a few deep breaths to steady himself and then sighed. “Well thank heaven for that.”

He resumed reading.

“I didn’t realize you’d find the thought so terrible,” she said. She placed the uneaten half of the brownie on her plate. She no longer desired it.

“It’s not terrible,” he muttered. “It’s just not a good time.”

“Not a good time? I didn’t ask if my parents could come spend a week with us, Gilles. I’m talking about a baby. What would you consider to be a good time?”

“Not now...” he said absently.

She reached into his cubicle, grabbed the tablet, and shoved it down into his lap.

“Can you pay attention to me a moment, please? I feel like this is kind of important.”

Rolling his eyes and sighing, Gilles said, “Alright, already. What? What’s so important?”

“Gilles...” she began, then stopped. She required a few moments, it seemed, to bring her anger back under control. He waited for her impatiently, tapping his foot, and she felt her temperature rise. “When is a good time, huh? If now isn’t a good time, when is? I’d like an answer, please.”

Leaning his head back against the seat, he said, “I don’t know, Baby. Honestly, have you been here the last couple of years? How often have I actually been home at a decent time over the last six months? Half? Half of the time I’ve managed to get home before eleven? How many times in the last couple of years have I dragged a sleeping bag along to the office?”

He shook his head and sighed.

“It’s not a good time. This project...I’d be a shitty father right now. You’d be like a single mother, Anna. I don’t want to do that. You’d end up resenting me, or worse.”

“I don’t want to end up resenting you now,” she said.

“Do you?”

“No. Not yet.”

He snorted. “I understand, Honey, I really do. But what can I do right now? The work is what it is. Once we’ve found a little system maturity...maybe. But we’re not there yet. We’re working on it. Trust

me, I'm busting my tail just to get there."

"When will you?"

"Soon."

"No. When?"

He looked at her curiously. "Are you laying down a deadline?"

"What if I was?"

He took a deep breath. "I'd say I deal with enough *deadline* bullshit at work, thanks, and about the last place I need it from is my wife."

He lifted the tablet and resumed reading.

She watched him silently for a few moments. Then she reclined her seat and tried to go back to sleep. When she failed to find sleep, she pretended.

It was all darkness and mist-ringed lights through the window when they touched down at JFK. Annalise had awakened automatically on descent; her unconscious mind detecting the audio cues warning she was at journey's end. Warm tone of the seat belt advisory, irregular whisper of clicking trays and cases throughout the dark cabin, the tired mutter of passengers collecting their personals. Gilles looked across the aisle and saw a couple holding hands tightly. A man and woman perhaps ten years older than he; the man breathing in deep, careful breaths while she whispered quietly in his ear, calming him. Gilles glanced down at Anna's slowly stirring form and brushed the back of her hand with his fingers. She smiled up at him, and he wondered if all was well, or if in her waking, she had forgotten to remember that all was not.

They scooted about on the tarmac for the usual period, seeming to zigzag back and forth for several minutes at a time, until finally they were delivered to their terminal and sent on their way. They passed a scrolling parade of unfamiliar, searching faces, crowds of people spawning through the concourse like salmon. They searched for overhead signs to tell them where to go; finding them, they went.

Then the long, disjointed wait as the baggage trundled around the carousel; people standing in empty pockets of isolated space resisting the urge to sit on the edge of the carousel frame, shifting weight from foot to foot, hair once immaculate now drooping to renegade streamers of exhaustion. Gilles watched as the light of recognition ignited in their eyes when they saw their items peek through the vinyl barrier all the way at the other end of the track, and noted the herculean resistance exhibited in their not walking to meet those items as they rolled along.

Annalise rested her head against his shoulder momentarily, and he sighed in relief. Putting his arm around her shoulder, he kissed the top of her head.

He recognized their driver easily as they neared the exit. A man of middle age, he wore a suit and tie and held a sign that said "Félix Deluca." Gilles gestured to him for Anna's benefit and guided her in his direction.

"Mr. Guattari?" the driver murmured as they closed the distance. Gilles nodded, knowing the driver must have been provided a photo.

“Take your bags, sir?”

“My wife’s, if you please. I’ll manage mine.”

A black and shining four-door Cadillac with a wide wheelbase and snarling chrome grill awaited outside the terminal. The trunk opened as they neared and their driver positioned himself to catch the rear door as it swung out and held it for them. They collapsed into the back seat and felt the car lurch under them as their luggage was deposited in the trunk.

“Straight to the hotel, sir?” the driver asked as he slammed the door.

“Yes, please,” Gilles nodded. He found his wife’s hand and looked out the window as they pulled away.

The city at night was as he had imagined it—as he had seen in movies and pictures—and yet he could not have been less prepared for the immediacy, the insistence of that living animal outside his window. It moved and throbbed along the curved glass, multi-colored light strobing in waves painting their faces in tumbling rotations of neon. People strolled the sidewalks, each one traveling within his or her own world. They held little shimmering devices beneath their eyes as they chose their path through peripheral vision, light from the back-lit screens coloring faces as often as not covered in masks obscuring mouths when those faces were not sheltered under hats or hoods. They traveled through the world behind a barrier, thought Gilles, experiencing life through the window of a six-inch liquid crystal display.

“Are any of those yours?” Annalise asked in a soft voice.

He looked at her across the seat and saw her pressed against the window. She was hunkered down slightly with her neck craned up to look into the sky. He mimicked her position in his own window and saw the second press of travelers some thirty feet overhead—an overlay of the human foot traffic; drones of various shape and size all moving along in orderly lines, adjusting speeds and trajectories like flying dancers. He thought he saw parcels suspended under some of the larger ones, though it was difficult to tell at night. He unfocused his eyes and searched out the slowest moving units. Finding them, he began to move his eyes from one to the next until he finally discovered what he sought.

And when he found the first, it was then easy to spot the others—the mid-size quads shuttling in fixed patterns and the shiny, black dome of an omnidirectional camera depending from each.

“Yes,” he said. “New York was... an early adopter.”

In the front seat, the driver cleared his throat nervously and said, “I hope you don’t mind me saying, sir...many of us are grateful.”

Gilles glanced at the back of his head and asked, “Pardon?”

“Guardian, sir. You don’t see it so much on TV, but there’s a whole lot of folks that appreciate the safety. Especially in the cities. I don’t know if it’s reduced... you know, but a lot of people’ve been caught after some crime, and Guardian’s the way they got ‘em.”

Gilles was a quiet a moment, thinking. He felt the squeeze of Annalise’s hand. “Thank you,” he said.

The driver nodded. “‘Course, sir.”

The sidewalk entrance of The Westin was devoid of people when they arrived. Gilles checked his phone and saw that it was 10:30. It was good news—either word had not gotten out that he was coming or the media and the protesters had called it a night early... unlikely. With a little luck, they could have an uneventful visit.

He looked ahead wistfully to a time some three or four months in the future, when all of the attention would die down again, and life would resume some level of normalcy.

The driver advised them to go on ahead to the lobby and that he would have their luggage sent up to their room. Gilles thanked him, passed a tip over the seat, collected his laptop bag, and ducked through the revolving entrance with Anna in tow.

They were fifteen minutes in clearing up the confusion caused at the front desk when the concierge checked Gilles’s identification. It did not match the name on the reservation, and they spent several moments arguing over it until the concierge called his manager down. Gilles explained the situation in a few terse words, after which she checked the register and then tapped through a few screens on a tablet. Then she apologized to Gilles for the inconvenience and instructed the concierge to program a room key.

They rode the elevator up to the thirty-seventh floor in silence, leaning quietly against the wall and against each other. Periodically, she kicked the heel of his shoe with her toe; periodically he flicked her lightly on the elbow. The door opened on their floor, and they drifted into the hallway, both agreeing without words that they would admire the floor-to-ceiling wood paneling after they had some sleep. Their room was at the end of the hall, and when he held the door for her, she gasped.

“Reggie went overboard,” she laughed, eyes wide.

“No, this wasn’t Reggie. This was me.”

“You?”

“On the plane, while you were asleep. I was able to get us a bit of an upgrade.”

“A bit...?”

“Well, quite a bit. Did you care to go in? I’d like to get these shoes off.”

They passed through the sitting room first; the collection of

couches, chairs, tables, and the fireplace. Gilles set his laptop bag down on the writing desk, briefly perused a touch panel on the wall, and tapped out a few commands. The lights dimmed, and the curtains drew back slowly to reveal The Empire State Building about a block away.

Annalise collapsed onto a sofa and sighed, looking through her window at the unsleeping city.

"I'm sorry," Gilles tried. "Back on the plane? I could point to everything going on at work right now but...I really have no excuse. I love you, Annalise. I'm sorry."

When she looked at him, he saw the light of the city shimmering in her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak but was stopped by a soft knock at the door and a muffled voice that called, "Luggage, sir!"

Later he turned on his laptop and hovered over it to resume his investigation, but she would not allow it. She first began with joking, then a short stint of begging mischievously, and finally with a demand. He heard the sharp static crackle in her voice that promised laughter, anger, punishment, and pleasure in equal quantities; fever-bright eyes arcing like electrodes. He closed the computer and was pulled away willingly, descending into a secret world.

And then all was darkness and motion, churning over the glow-lit city, and they enwrapped each other, and disentangled and enwrapped, and all was darkness and churning, and perfection. Perfection over the glow-lit city.

When they finished, they were starving, and Annalise was delighted to discover that room service was available around the clock.

Gilles was up early on the following morning; a rarity for him, though unavoidable. He lay in bed wide awake for a good hour before giving up, mind running in circles like a centrifuge. Glancing at the clock on the side table, he saw in the darkness that it was 4:13. He sighed, got up, used the toilet, and brushed his teeth as quietly as he could before letting himself out of the bedroom.

He spent the next few hours in the sitting room making occasional trips between the coffee pot and the writing desk, devoting the rest of this period to the machine. He had opened the curtains for the morning light, desiring some visual cue that would tell him when it was time to shower and get ready for the day. The screen of the laptop bathed him in a pearlescent glow and, as the sun climbed over the horizon to warm the new day, he noted the environmental change only through the perception of an annoying glare somewhere off to his left. When the laptop clock said 7:00, he rose from the desk and returned to the bedroom, having not looked through the window even once.

He went through the morning routine as quietly as possible but still managed to awaken Annalise in the process. She *harrumphed* as she rolled away from the light of the bathroom, pulling his pillow over her head. When he came to kiss her goodbye, she resisted his attempt to draw the pillow away, and beneath it, he saw a sharp line drawn vertically between her eyebrows. He knew that line very well. It was the line that said “No.”

He kissed her forehead—really just a brush of the lips—and whispered, “I have to go to work, Babe.”

She nodded softly.

“What is this, anyway? You’re always up before me.”

A hand crept from beneath the blanket to shield her mouth. “I’m on vacation. Sleeping...”

He laughed as quietly as he could, kissed her again, and left.

There was a different person at the front desk; this time a woman with red hair and a face notable only for its forgettability. He asked her to hail him a cab and went to have a seat in the lobby. The day was well on its way by the time he had composed himself in the chair; a steady stream of men and women in suits both entered and exited the building. Sometimes they glanced at him as they passed, though

this did not occur often. Mostly, they just kept their eyes on their screens; dialing numbers, checking messages. Sometimes they would ricochet off each other like unguided pin-balls, excusing themselves with hardly an upward glance.

Watching them, Gilles wished for a hat, yet such a thing would have only drawn more attention, being out of place with his own suit. He wondered if he could get away with sunglasses but decided he might look odd wearing them indoors.

The doorman soon entered to advise Gilles that his cab had arrived. He settled into the backseat and greeted the driver: a turbaned man with a gorgeous, luxuriant beard.

"Where are we going, sir?" asked the driver. There was real music in his voice, and the sound of it made Gilles smile.

"Corner of Nassau and Pine, please."

The driver nodded and tapped the screen on his center console. A timer began to tick away the seconds. As they maneuvered (expertly, it seemed to Gilles) through the morning traffic, he looked out his window at the action of the sidewalks, the press of people moving purposefully through their mornings. He noted there were far fewer looking at their phones, now; most of them seemed to be engaged in calls, holding the devices to their ears or speaking into thin air as though communing with imagined spirits existing only in the universes of their minds. He saw a smattering of masked faces in the crowd. Heads directed, either intentionally or unconsciously, at the pavement. He glanced up at the darting constellations of machinery. As they flitted from place to place, he imagined they too had their destinations and that they perhaps thought distractedly of other tasks queued for pursuit, things to be accomplished later in the day before they could return home and rest.

Nassau was a deep alley walled on either side with a riot of classical architecture rammed into the newer, featureless smooth boxes of the modern era; pushing shoulder to shoulder for dominance and reaching into the sky for the glory of their respective kinds. There was a suggestion of violence, he thought, in their proximity, each to the other, as if two worlds sought to strangle each other in a contest for space. The effect should have been jarring, and so it was, yet the discomfort derived from the realization that, for this city, the war of styles was appropriate and attractive. There was a rightness to the disparity; a correctness in the noise that could only be New York, down to the square bricks laid in the street God only knew how long ago. Perfect squares that had long since ceased to be perfect, worn to roundness over generations by the feet of the unthoughtful as they bustled to their most critical of destinations.

On the corner, Gilles saw a squat, beige building composed of huge



stone blocks with a line of enormous columns barring the entrance. It reminded him of ancient Greek architecture, and he fell in love with it immediately.

He drifted through this strange world, near entranced, until he found the building he sought. He followed the signage within, discovering the proper floor eventually with the proper faction of suited people, who all looked so much alike to him, and checked in at the front desk. The receptionist made a quick call, spoke into her phone a few moments, and then said, "Mr. Roth should be out any moment, sir. Would you care to have a seat?"

She gestured to a small waiting area dominated by several oversized leather chairs. Gilles had not fully distributed his weight to the seat of one of these when the man whom he remembered from the TED Talk strode down the hall. He had aged since the recording of that old video. Face more wrinkled, hair more gray.

"Dr. Guattari!" he called, extending a hand to shake before Gilles could rise.

"Gilles, please!" he smiled, shaking awkwardly as he stood from the chair.

"Gilles it is, then, and you can call me Kevin as well."

Gilles nodded and was half pulled-half guided toward the hall from which Kevin had emerged.

"Did you have the chance to fill out the initial NDA?" asked Kevin, his hand held out to show the way.

"I did. It should be in somebody's inbox, I suppose."

"Good, good. I'll get with HR and confirm. Just this way; there are a few more niceties to run through with Legal. They tell me it's not as bad as financing a house, but then I've heard it comes pretty damned close. I hope you'll bear with us."

"Of course," said Gilles. "We do something very similar with vendors at my company as well."

Kevin perked slightly at the use of the word "vendors," then shrugged with a single shoulder. "Well... let's get it out of the way, then. After that, we can... uh... oh, hell. It's really frustrating; I want to dive right into it, you see. Look, just head on through that door, give them your name, and sign your whole life away, okay? There's a lot to discuss. They'll call me to come collect you when you've finished."

The process turned out to be as onerous as Kevin had suggested. It was striking just how similar it was to purchasing a house, with a lawyer sitting next to him at the table pointing at various signature lines to describe what the verbiage meant.

*"This part just states that you agree not to use any of the technology or techniques you're exposed to here for the purposes of direct competition*

with Anagnorisis Technologies for a period of five years after your contract is terminated...”

“This section acknowledges that you’ll be subject to legal action should you expose any company secrets to an outside party...”

“This statement and the three addenda following indicate that any work you do under contract for Anagnorisis Technologies becomes the intellectual property of Anagnorisis Technologies; please initial, sign, and date right here, Mr. Guattari...”

As he signed the last page, the lawyer who sat with him picked up a phone and said a few words into it. Kevin Roth materialized a few moments later to collect Gilles, smiling warmly. Gilles shook with the lawyer, feeling dazed, and Kevin led him down another hallway to a long, window-lined conference room appointed with furniture that Gilles had come to think of over his career as “*Intimidation Chic*.” A few different people ringed the long, glass-topped table, all of whom stood when he entered the room.

“Here he is!” Kevin proclaimed happily. “None the worse for wear after the lawyers tapped a vein, eh? Gilles, I’d like to introduce you to a few people. The lady up at the head of the table is our CEO, Linnéa Nilsson. To her right is Marcus; he’s the Chief Project Engineer on the, ah, little program you’ll be sitting in on; I think you’ll be interfacing with him the most while you’re here with us. To the opposite end is Ross; he’s one of our few Principal Engineers at Anagnorisis. Aaand, I suppose you know who I am by now...”

He let the last bit trail off in a smile, pleased either with his own affability or with Gilles’s obvious reticence. Gilles stepped into the room and made a circuit of the table, shaking hands with and bowing slightly to each person he encountered. He was impressed in a distracted fashion that Linnéa possessed a grip of iron, careless in its application, and he saw in her eyes that the strength he felt was not directed as a mechanism to earn her place among men. He had a sense that he felt strength only because it was an aspect indivisible of her nature, like some people possessive of a high voice or quick laugh. He was put off balance further when she and Ross excused themselves and left the room following their introduction. They had only been there to have a look at him, it seemed. Several meanings could be gleaned from this; Gilles suspected he might be able to dream up one or two.

The good-mornings were concluded with the efficiency of a German assembly line, and Gilles took a position at the table opposite Kevin and Marcus. He tucked his laptop back behind a chair and saw how all was visible beneath the surface of the glass tabletop. He shifted in his seat and reminded himself not to scratch himself in ways that would embarrass. Looking closely at the surface, he realized he

could detect no smudge or print. He crossed his fingers over his chest, resting elbows on his chair's armrests.

Kevin asked, "Do you want to get started, Marcus?"

The other nodded and then regarded Gilles without comment. It started to be uncomfortable, but before Gilles could speak, Marcus said, "I need to make a few things clear, Gilles. I'm not good with people. I suppose you could say that I'm a bit of an introvert. I come off as abrupt, even terse, most of the time, and most people who don't know me don't know how to take that. It's a thing I've come to learn... and you'll learn it, too, soon enough. I'll ask you not to take anything personally. There's no reason to suspect that I'm annoyed with you or that I dislike you, understood? You'll know when I don't like you. I'll just tell you."

Gilles swallowed and nodded. "That's a deal."

"Thank you." Marcus turned on an overhead projector with a remote control, bathing the far wall in slowly-intensifying light, retrieved a manila folder from a chair positioned behind him, and dropped it on the tabletop with a clap. He opened it, pulled out a thin stack of papers, flipped through a few of the pages, and then read: "The Problem with Strong AI."

Oh dear...

"So, the thing you have to understand about that..." Gilles began.

"You wrote this when you were how old?"

"Uh... fourteen."

"Fourteen..." Marcus repeated. He scrolled down a page with a fingertip, stopped, and began to read again: "... If it is true that the human brain is little more than an organic processor, why is it that we cannot create general intelligence by design, given that our own intelligence developed naturally by a causal chain of accidents? Should we not be able to achieve the end state that much faster if we are actually trying to get there? The fundamental problem in the pursuit of a true, artificial entity lies in the differences of function between the human brain and the silicon machine. Chief among these: that the portion of the silicon machine that *processes* and the portion that remembers are separate structures. This is not so in the human brain; the structures that process and remember are indivisible..."

He stopped reading and looked again at Gilles.

Gilles cleared his throat and said, "There's obviously a lot of guesswork being done there..."

"How so?"

"Well, as it relates to the human brain. We still don't know for sure how any of that works; especially memory, right? We have some gross observations, but that's about it. We think, for instance, that certain parts of the brain are responsible for specific types of memory storage

only because some doctor somewhere cut a piece of somebody's brain out to treat a neurological ailment, finding after the fact that those specific memory types could no longer be stored or accessed. On one hand, that does tell us something but... honestly. Cutting pieces of brain out and observing how behavior is impacted?"

"Not a fan, eh?" Kevin smiled.

"It's just short of leach-craft."

Marcus nodded thoughtfully and glanced back down at the paper. As he scrolled further with his index finger, Gilles realized that he was being interviewed for whatever work it was they wished him to do.

Marcus stopped at another page and read again: "... leads to the conclusion that general intelligence cannot yet be achieved with today's state of technology, given that it lacks the complexity required to achieve the only expression of consciousness we as the progenitors of such an intelligence are likely to recognize. The first true thinking machine will, therefore, be composed of an architecture fundamentally different from the systems we know today. Lacking a high-level programming language complex enough to satisfy the goal, the idea of programming true intelligence must be abandoned outright. It must be cultivated over time, like our own intellect, both to allow said complexity to grow itself—given that we cannot define it, we must abdicate the responsibility to do so—and for allowing ourselves to recognize the newly formed conscious being when it finally emerges. The intelligence must be like our own, or as like to our own as can be, or we may fail to identify it when it presents.

"We are then left with building a low-level simulation of the human neocortical structures in the hopes that the desired function presents as an emergent phenomenon. Such a construct would, therefore, require a physical aspect capable of interacting with the surrounding environment for those reasons already explored, as well as a sub-layer of instinctive drivers (as in a BIOS) that spurs the system to interact and explore. Pleasure, pain, and so on must be represented (or simulated, at the very least) to the greatest degree possible.

"Sadly, as has been discussed, the classic silicon system lacks the requisite complexity for the task. It is therefore incumbent upon the progenitor to explore a different medium. Likely candidates include biological platforms capable of processing and storing information naturally, such as certain species of fungus, or even portions of existing gray matter (perhaps harvested from a deceased donor)..."

Marcus ceased reading and put the paper on the table. "A lot of interesting thoughts, there..." he said.

"Admittedly rambling and disjointed," Gilles laughed.

Marcus nodded while shrugging dismissively. Kevin said, "And yet

it was a big part of what got you into college ahead of schedule. Seventeen, or thereabouts? Did you know that would happen when you posted this paper online?"

Gilles shook his head. "Young people often think that every little thought exercise is a revelation..."

Marcus snorted. "And yet two years after you wrote this paper, a man named Kevin Warwick releases the following..."

He pressed a button on the remote control. On the far wall, a video displayed showing small, wheeled devices moving to and fro over a floor. They impacted various obstacles, including each other, rotated, and pursued differing directions, juttering about seemingly at random."

"Were you aware of this video?" Marcus asked.

"Yes, a friend sent the link to me some time ago. We had quite a laugh over it, actually."

Marcus paused a moment, looking at him, and said, "Those little robots are being controlled by neural networks grown from the cultured brain cells of lab rats. They apparently displayed learning behavior and even, as claimed by Warwick, aspects of unique personality."

"Yes, it really was rather impressive," Gilles nodded.

"Your paper predicted this."

Gilles winced. "Eh... I wouldn't categorize it as that great a leap of intuition..."

Kevin laughed and said, "You wrote it when you were fourteen, Gilles. Know what I was doing when I was fourteen? I wouldn't want to say here; perhaps over a beer sometime. I wasn't writing academic papers, though."

"So," Marcus pressed on, "you entered college at seventeen, pursuing a major in psychology. You appear to have come rather close to completing your first degree, then abruptly shifted majors to computer science. Why?"

Gilles nodded. He had been asked this question before. "It happened during a class project, really. Or rather, that's when the realization hit me. I was becoming less enamored with the field of psychology as I learned more about it. I found it to be too nondeterministic. A lot of theories with a lot of wiggle room that allowed for those theories to be wrong half the time while still being right on paper. The underlying core of psychology—that is the study—remains very interesting to me, even so. It's just all of the constructs we've built up around it. I found a lot of it to be tedious.

"So what actually happened was that we (that is a small group of students) were conducting a study for a class, more to go through the exercise itself than to actually learn anything of note. We were in the

process of analyzing large population samples, which, I'm sure you know, requires a great deal of statistics. As we went, I started building predictive models using data we'd already captured, first in programs like MATLAB before branching out into other industry standard languages. And I guess you could say that I fell in love with that activity, that process of building complex mechanisms from the ground up. Logical systems that just run like clockwork. I finished out the semester and changed my major shortly after. Thankfully, a decent amount of what I'd done up to that point was fairly transferable. Within the realm of general education, obviously..."

Marcus had looked back down at his stack of paperwork during the explanation, so Gilles shifted his attention to Kevin for the remainder. Almost as the last word escaped his lips, Marcus grunted, "You had your doctorate at age twenty-two..."

"Well, yes, but it wasn't medical, so it hardly counts," Gilles smiled.

"I see. And by extension, I suppose you're equally willing to discount Kevin's Ph.D. as well?"

Gilles choked and spent the next several seconds coughing violently. When the fit passed, he said, "Excuse me. That-that line usually goes over a lot better at parties."

Kevin began to laugh. The sound of it was warm and honest, and he said, "It's okay, Gilles, it's quite alright. I'll most likely steal that line from you myself, and Marcus... well, he just enjoys being a dick sometimes."

Gilles arrested the emergent laugh at his teeth, biting down upon it savagely like it was an animal he sought to throttle. The momentary scowl on Marcus's face told him he had behaved wisely.

"So, Mister not a medical doctor Guattari, what can you tell us about your work in the Guardian program? Or I guess I'll ask what you're allowed to share with us?" Kevin asked. When Gilles hesitated, he added, "All politics aside, obviously. We're not interested in how it's being utilized or perceived. We're just engineers here, okay? Let's address the question from an engineering perspective."

Gilles nodded slowly and said, "I suppose that's the best way. Honestly, that's kind of how the project emerged. It was just an interesting problem I was trying to solve at the time. We were working on improvements to facial recognition software, you see. One of the things that always bugged me about it was the degree of error introduced into the prevalent algorithms if alignment toward the camera degraded. In other words, if you centered your face well enough, the feature worked reasonably well, but put your face in three-quarter profile or something similar, and you start having to fight with all these point-match errors. So I was working on ways to

improve that so we could boost performance. Designing a system tolerant of misalignment creates a faster system overall, you see? I was looking for near-instantaneous recognition from virtually any angle.

“What emerged was just something I stumbled upon. What we did was redesign the neural network from the ground up and we added in the capacity to deal with foreshortening. It works the same way we recognize faces as humans, right? For instance—and maybe you've considered this at some point... or maybe not, but that doesn't matter—imagine you're standing in a large warehouse on an upper level... like a catwalk, okay? You're looking at your workers below on the ground level as they walk around doing their jobs—you're looking for one of them in particular. Are you able to locate that person?”

Kevin thought about it only briefly before saying, “Of course.”

“Why?”

“I see what you mean,” Marcus said. “It's a process of interpolation.”

“Exactly,” Gilles nodded. “You can tell who is who because you're not relying only on a flattened image of a face. You've seen this person's face at multiple angles in your day to day dealings, so you know what they look like from different angles. Also, you know how they move, how their body's shaped, and so on. All of this information comes together in your mind seamlessly to help you identify your target.

“The biggest problem, or challenge, with implementing such behavior in a computer system is that we don't have all that extra positional data on file—or at least we don't always. You have an ID photo, maybe. Maybe a mugshot in profile as well if you're lucky. So the first thing I worked on was a projective algorithm that could take a two-dimensional image of a foreshortened face, map it onto a three-dimensional plane, and then error-correct for a full-frontal rotation. Or in other words, I can take an off-center shot of a person wherein you see a face heavily corrupted through forced perspective and logically rotate it to a degree that I can print you a procedurally-generated mugshot, and you'd be able to tell who it was. The fidelity is good enough, in fact, that less advanced computer systems can then compare my generated shot against an actual mugshot and match them as the same person. And, I can generate that initial image without having any other imagery of that person on file.”

“We've done our homework on you, Gilles, we know a great deal of this already, but can you tell us how? At a low level I mean?” asked Marcus.

Kevin raised a hand and said, “Insofar as it doesn't violate your IP, of course. We've signed a great deal less than you folks have, I fear.”

Gilles nodded thoughtfully and said, "I think I can say in a general sense. The broad strokes are that we built the logic first and then spent the next year training the system with as much raw data as we could get our hands on—magazines, photos, and such, all scoured from the internet with purpose-built tooling—which was quite significant, I'll say. Then there was the 3D work, both with inanimates and living subjects, to teach the system about lighting, shading, angle calculation, projection, and so on. It took us a whole year to get the system up to a level of accuracy that we found acceptable, followed by another four months to get that accuracy up to a point where the government was willing to go live."

"And those numbers were...?" Marcus prodded.

"We initially set out for 78% accuracy; our analysis showed us that this was the level at which real-time recognition reached performance factors comparable to the average human. The government wanted to see 90%."

"And you achieved this?"

"Indeed," Gilles said. He tried to avoid smirking but still found the action impossible to resist. It had been a hellacious four months.

"How did you make up the 12% delta?"

Now smiling fully, Gilles said, "That I cannot share, unfortunately."

Kevin laughed, and even Marcus smiled at this. "That must have been quite an exciting time..." Kevin said, knocking the tabletop lightly with a knuckle.

Gilles nodded.

"And so that works until it doesn't," Marcus said, "hats and masks functioning as they do..."

"Yes, that is a challenge. You have to remember, when we first built the system we hadn't counted on it being used in this fashion. We were just trying to build a better facial recognition platform. And then, when they told us what it would be used for, I never realized personally the kind of backlash we'd see. Plenty of cities in Europe are densely populated with security cameras everywhere, and they certainly didn't go crazy over there, so far as I know. I sure didn't expect designer masks to become a thing at any point, let me tell you..."

"And so the new Voice upgrade will account for that..." Kevin said.

"Yes. It works about the same way, except we adapted the logic to filter out background noise instead of predicting facial structure. You'd be surprised how much overlap there actually was between the two systems, though I can't specify exactly how. Most drone systems came installed with a provisional microphone, anyway, so... you know."

Kevin nodded and glanced at Marcus. "Well, it sounds exciting, as I



said, Gilles. I think some congratulations are in order for your coming roll-out. I'm sure it'll be a success."

"Thank you."

"And how are you dealing with the backlash?" Marcus asked.

"Ah... it's been... a challenge."

"Impact your private life at all?"

"Yes. It's... yes, it's been a challenge."

"Care to elaborate on that?"

"No. I've said as much as the topic deserves, which will be sufficient for the purposes of this discussion."

Marcus sat up and looked at him with fresh eyes. He looked at Kevin briefly and then nodded. "Fair enough. That's fair enough, Gilles."

Then the two men looked at each other again and nodded, and Gilles detected a channel of communication having passed between them, as indecipherable as thought.

Kevin looked at him again, smiled, and said, "Well, I'm sure you'd like to know why we hauled you all the way out to New York, eh? I guess it's time we got to the damned point. How much do you know, Gilles, about quantum computers?"

“Essentially, they are a wholly new processor type. When they go into general use, they’ll instigate an industry-wide paradigm shift. They’ll be for the computers of tomorrow what the Apple I was for the computers of today.”

Gilles leaned forward to say more, but their waiters arrived with the third course of the evening (lacquered lobster tail, black truffle tailgate, and black truffle emulsion). He waited silently as the plates were positioned on the table, shifting jerkily from side to side in his chair until they left.

“I see...” Annalise said slowly. “And then, if you want me to *really* see, you’re going to have to break this down into much simpler terms.”

“Of course, of course,” Gilles said. He speared the tip of the tail with his fork, cut it free, and popped it into his mouth. Chewing luxuriously, he hesitated long enough to whisper “*Oh my...*” before swallowing.

“Well, let’s see... you’re familiar with binary?”

“Sure, ones and zeroes.”

“Okay. The first thing you have to realize is that binary is the only thing a computer truly understands. No matter how advanced, how complex, or how fast the processor is, the only thing it can handle at its core is a one or a zero. True or false, on or off. And then the way such limited ability becomes meaningful to users is through a process called abstraction. We assign symbolic meaning to patterns of ones and zeros, or bits, so that they may be transformed into higher levels of meaning.”

He paused a moment to gauge her expression and laughed softly. “Okay, I can see your eyes are glazing over. Just stick with me a moment; I’ll give a quick example and then move on.”

“I look forward to it,” she smiled. Beneath the tablecloth, she freed her foot from its shoe.

“Take letters,” said Gilles. “You’re writing a letter, for instance. You have a screen filled with words, all of which are composed of letters. But a computer doesn’t understand letters; it understands bits. So, how do you find a middle ground so that both you and the computer understand what’s on the screen? You treat the letters as symbols. You assign numeric values to each letter, which can then be

represented as a stream of bits. Binary is a fully featured numeric system, just like decimal. So the letter 'A,' for example, might be assigned a value of sixty-five, which it is..."

He pulled his phone from its pocket and tapped the screen for a few moments.

"... and in binary it looks like this."

She took the phone from him and saw an eight-number series of zeros and ones. As she looked at this, Gilles said, "That's all the letter 'A' really looks like to a processor."

She passed the phone back, finished the last bite of her lobster, and took a long swallow of wine. She rolled her ankle and began mischievously to probe.

"I understand all that," she said, "but I still fail to see how you go from sixty-five equals 'A' to everything else. The video games they're making now, what they're doing in movies...?"

"Yes, but you can begin to see how we use symbolism to bring higher meaning to all these seemingly random bits, can't you?"

"I suppose."

"Excellent. Now, the problem we run into is that computers can't handle problems with a high degree of exponential scaling. They just don't have enough horsepower."

She smiled again and said, "You'd better explain that term as well."

He jumped suddenly, and his knee struck the underside of the table. He glanced around the dining room, face deepening to bright red, and then looked back at Annalise.

"I'm waiting," she sang.

He took a drink of wine, cleared his throat, and pressed on.

"Let's pretend for a moment that you're planning a wedding. You have big, round tables around which can be seated ten guests each. And in this situation, let's say you wish to employ a computer to determine all of the possible ways that a group of ten people can be arranged at the table."

"Well, that's silly," she said. "I wouldn't use a computer for that. I'd just make sure to separate people who dislike each other and keep guests together with their dates."

"Okay, but pretend you need to know the answer—"

"But I don't," she laughed. He jerked again in his chair and giggled nervously.

"Please..." he coughed.

"Oh, Gilles, can you or can you not explain this? I may be losing faith..."

"Right. So... where the hell was I? Ah. Ten people around the table. So, it turns out there are three million, six hundred twenty-eight thousand, eight hundred possible combinations."

She straightened at this. "For ten people?"

"Indeed. Now, imagine you have a dining hall filled with twenty of these tables and take into account the possibility that you can also swap people from table to table. You begin to see the problem, I assume. Put another way; I'll touch for just a moment on the field of simulation. You take the simplest form of iron sulfide cluster, in itself an exceptionally simple molecular ensemble. Just two chemicals, iron, and sulfide joined up into a little cluster. And it is at the very edge of what our most powerful supercomputers can simulate."

"How, though, if it's so simple?" she asked.

"Because you have to simulate it at the atomic level to do the job right. All of the electrons, their orbits and interactions..."

"Ah, of course."

They were interrupted again by the waiter, who came to refill their glasses.

"How did you find the truffles?" Gilles asked.

"Incredible!" she gasped. "My first time having them!"

The waiter smiled benevolently and left.

Gilles watched the waiter's back a moment and nodded. "So, let's get away from classical computers. We'll be here all night if we dwell on it. Moving along: quantum computers. The big deal about these things is that they understand more than true or false. They understand true, false, and maybe."

"What?" she laughed.

"I know, bear with me. A bit on a quantum computer... we call it a qubit..."

"Oh, you're making this up, now. Quit playing."

"No, I'm not, I swear to God; this is all for real. A qubit can represent three states, like I said. They can be one, zero, or both; what is called a superposition. The thing about these processors is that they're built specifically to scale exponentially, unlike the classical processor. You can combine multiple qubits into a joined superposition. Or, you can entangle them together into a unique form of superposition in such a way that measuring one qubit will tell you what the other is doing."

"Stop," she said. "That's enough. You've hereby exceeded my ability to absorb anything further. You have transgressed into a dialect of nerd-ese that I simply do not speak."

He laughed and leaned in close to whisper, "Between you and me, I don't get it either."

"What? I thought you were called in to consult on this stuff."

"I'm getting to that, but they want me for something entirely different. This quantum stuff, though. Put it this way, as much as the low-level function of a classical computer eludes you, this qubit stuff

completely escapes me. I'm nowhere near as smart as this engineer they have; this Marcus guy. He seems to understand it all perfectly."

"Maybe, maybe not," she sniffed. "In my experience, if a person really understands something, they can find a way to explain it so that others understand it as well."

"Perhaps," shrugged Gilles. "Maybe it's only a question of time."

"Maybe it's just that it all sounds like a bunch of science fiction hocus-pocus," she grumbled.

"Well... that statement has more truth to it than you might realize." She looked at him with a confused expression but said nothing. Her foot had long since settled back to the floor, but neither of them noticed.

"The reason you don't hear about these things more is that they're so damned hard to build. They're huge and clunky, like the first computers they tried to build way back in the 1950's—vast, room-filling monstrosities capable only of very simple equations. Part of the problem is the environment they require to operate. A qubit today is constructed from a special kind of superconductor that's read with a microwave resonator. These things have to be kept as close to absolute zero as possible in order to function; any warmer than that and the error rate shoots through the roof and the answers the machine gives you are meaningless. You can imagine the limitations they run into trying to build a quantum computer of any meaningful size. Then, too, you have the problem of coherence time—how long a qubit holds its information. It's not very long at all, on the order of a few microseconds."

"Heads-up, toots. Next course inbound."

They leaned back as more plates were deposited on the table. One waiter took a moment to refill their wine glasses yet again and then bowed away with a knowing smile.

"What's the matter, Anna, did you drop something?" he asked.

She had leaned sideways to examine the tablecloth. She rustled it about and asked, "Can you see my feet?"

He leaned to see where she indicated and shrugged. "Not really."

She glanced in the direction of the retreating waiter with narrowed eyes. Setting her chin, she found the inside of his thigh and slid her foot all the way to its root, where she felt him respond immediately. Baring a line of small, sharp teeth, she said, "So, they have a quantum computer that's sort of useful and they want you to work on it for some reason."

"No," he whispered. "They've managed to build one that is useful."

"How?" she prodded, daring him to hold his thought.

"The, uh... Kevin... their CTO. Perfected a process for manufacturing carbon nanotubes some time ago... better than

anything managed before. That was also a big... oh... a big deal, actually; you could say one revelation followed from the other."

"Carbon nanotubes," she whispered. "And why should I care about those?" She rolled her ankle again, and swished, and prodded. His knuckles whitened.

"Not a damned reason I can think of... except to say they figured out how to build a quantum computer that no longer requires all the space or any other physical requirements of traditional system... s. Good heavens."

"Gilles?"

"Christ... yes?"

"I'm not all that hungry anymore."

"I see."

"Are you?"

"No!"

"Good. Call the waiter over here and pay the bill, would you?"

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They had turned out the lights, drawn back the curtains, and opened the bedroom window before. The night sounds of the living city crept in to mingle with their act, and the light of the moon intermixed with the electric glow of the throbbing world beneath, bathing them in blue.

They lay in the bed amid a tangle of blankets, exhausted and panting from too much drink and not enough food. Gilles was staring up at the ceiling, wondering idly over troubling thoughts. Time wandered away from him, and soon Anna ran the instep of her foot—the very same that caused all of this to begin with—up his shin. Goose-flesh stood out along the length of his thigh.

He tore his attention from within and looked at her.

She lay on her right side, facing him, snarl of blankets wedged under her breast and leg, glowing blue hip softly outlined in the window.

She asked, "Can't you stop for a little while, at least? Where did you go just now?"

"I am where I've always been. Here beside you."

"No," she shook her head against the pillow. "I saw it in your eyes. They drifted away after you came."

He rolled over to face her and took her hand. Her features were hidden to him, as though he struggled in a dream to recall the face of a loved one buried long in memory. He studied the curve of her ear.

"What?" she asked.

"They want me to do a thing I don't think I can do."

“Unethical?”

“No,” he sighed. “Impossible.”

She squeezed his hand and waited.

“They built a thing, Anna... and they're not sure what they now have.”

He rolled to his back again and stared up at the ceiling.

“The same way Guardian grew from my desire to optimize basic facial recognition, they built a thing... well, Marcus built it. Composed, apparently, of hundreds of miles of carbon nanotubes and light interacting in ways I can't even fathom, training it over time, just like one of my own neural networks, for months stretching to years. Adding capacity, boosting complexity, making it smarter... just to see if they could. Two years in, if I remember Marcus's presentation correctly, they started giving it tasks. Randomized jobs to perform, data crunching, analysis. A certain repetitive creativity in its problem-solving methodology began to emerge... tangible. Noticeable.”

He fell silent.

Anna waited several moments for him to continue, though he did not. She began to regret her earlier comment about science fiction; perhaps it had caused him to hold this in. Had she in some way embarrassed him?

“So what happened?” she asked.

“They assigned it a problem to solve, and it said 'no.'”

She rolled onto her back. In the bottom of her vision, she saw the tips of her breasts point toward the ceiling, and she covered them self-consciously with the sheet. He used to complain about that when they were first married; said he loved to look at her. Then she had explained her feeling on the matter, and he had not brought it up again.

“Is it okay for you to be telling me this?”

“No,” he scoffed, “I signed about a hundred documents stating I must not, but you're my wife. That comes with certain privileges. I'd caution you to keep it to yourself but... you don't know anyone in my industry, anyway. Who would you tell?”

“Even so... maybe we shouldn't...”

“Don't worry about it,” he said, waving a hand.

“Well, in that case... what do you think? Can this be real?”

“That's what I'm supposed to find out.”

“Huh?”

“That the machine refused a task has made a number of Anagnorisis engineers rather concerned. Kevin Roth in particular; as an executive, he spends a lot of time thinking about perception. And if this is what they think it might be, well, god knows how it'll be taken, right? Look what's happening to me. All I did was make a camera.”

“So, they want...?”

“They want me to evaluate the machine and determine if a true intelligence has emerged.”

“Why you?” she asked in a far-off, distracted voice.

“Oh, thanks a bunch...”

“No, really. Why you? You've already admitted you don't even understand how the technology works. I get that you're a 'big deal' in the field but... you didn't build this thing, they did. Wouldn't they be better suited to judge this themselves?”

“They seem to think not. I see their point as well; they've been working very closely with this system for years, so they may be too close to it for impartiality. They want an outsider. Also—and I'm not sure about this, but I get this impression—I think they want me because of my little false start.”

“The psych work?”

“Yes, just a feeling I had; they asked me quite a few more follow-on questions about it. I think they may like that I have insight into the situation greater than your average engineer.”

“But you said you don't think you can do this...”

“Yes,” he nodded.

She turned her head back to study his profile. His eyes looked up ahead, unblinking. “Why?”

“They're basically asking me to determine if this system has become conscious. That's impossible. You cannot prove whether something is conscious or not.”

She laughed and said, “That's nonsense. I'm conscious.”

“Yes, but I can't tell.”

She slapped him on the shoulder. “Asshole!”

“No,” he winced, rubbing where she had struck him, “I'm serious here. I have no way to determine that you're conscious outside of observing various behaviors. I can see that you behave in a fashion highly suggestive of conscious activity, and yet because I cannot actually experience reality from your point of view—I cannot live within your mind, so to speak—I cannot say with certainty that you are a conscious being. I can only infer based on context. You are a biological organism, like myself, built in the same way as me with a physical system employing all of the same mechanisms. I know that you possess a brain, because you are human like me; I know that you feel and think, because you behave in ways that are predictable and make sense; and most importantly, because I know for a fact that I, myself am conscious, it, therefore, makes sense to assume that you are conscious as well because we are so much alike from a biological standpoint.”

She sat up on the mattress and thought a moment. “That's nuts,”



she finally declared.

“Why?”

“Because... because it is. You sound like one of my half-assed philosophy majors that like to run around claiming that nothing in the world tangibly exists, though I can smack my hand against a table. I see it. It's right there. It exists! I see you doing the things you do every day. You're conscious, clearly!”

“Can you devise a test capable of proving that I'm conscious?” asked Gilles.

“Of course!”

“Good. And could you devise a test that proves an inanimate object... your table, perhaps... is not conscious?”

“Obviously...”

“What about a computer designed to simulate a human? Never mind quantum systems; they already have specialized AI's running on classical computers that pass the Turing Test easily. If I locked a human in one room and one of those AI's in another, and you could only communicate with both via voice chat, would you be able to devise a test proving that the human is conscious and the machine is not?”

She did not answer.

“Indeed.”

“Then why bother trying?” she finally asked. “If it's as impossible as you say, why even step up to the plate?”

He smiled. “Eh, it'll be a fun distraction for a while, I imagine. A chance to put my name on a paper or study not associated with Guardian. Maybe a way for me to start distancing myself from that system. I'm tired of all the scrutiny, Babe. I don't want it anymore.”

She nodded. This, at least, was a thing she could understand.

He rolled over onto his side, putting his back to her, and said, “Anyway, let me know if you get that test figured out. I sure could use some ideas.”

He sighed heavily and said no more until morning.

The corporate offices of Anagnorisis Technologies were located in the Manhattan Business District; Human Resources, Finance, Legal, and much of the Executive Management staff under the strategic planning arm of the company. The R&D Lab was housed at a remote, nondescript office about an hour and a half north of the New York city boundary, west of the Hudson River, accessed by meandering, two-lane highways that delved first through picturesque suburban neighborhoods before becoming lost in the tree-choked countryside. Gilles looked from the rear seat of the sedan, held enraptured by the scrolling fields of green, yellow, and orange; the spindled, white and brown trunks of trees he could not begin to name; the rocky paths and rushing streams. Following his first two days buried in the heart of the city, he felt he may have stumbled into a new world entirely.

He first tried, having penetrated deep into the country, to look ahead of the driver to see where they went but soon gave up. The road was ever winding, and he could see ahead perhaps only five hundred yards at best. He contented himself with watching the blurred surrounding world and submitted to the hypnosis of the unfamiliar.

They arrived at an unmarked building shortly after eight; a squat, gray, box jarring in its divergence from the architecture to which he had fast adjusted on the previous day. It was depressingly square with flat walls, large tinted windows at regular intervals, a loading dock around the side, and a fat, blue stripe running around the top edge as a minimal concession to color. The sole characteristic that saved it from appearing to be a cog-manufacturing warehouse was, to Gilles's eyes, the fact that it had only one story. The structures to which he had grown accustomed always towered stupidly in the middle of a sprawling lot. The saving grace of this new place was that the parking lot was minuscule compared to the implied square footage of the building itself and the trees encroached close to the walls, obscuring much of its ugliness, distracting even from the fact that the tops of the HVAC units were visible over the wall.

The driver pulled up to a short unloading area outside the lobby, parked, and circled around the back to hold the door for Gilles. He declined his tip when offered, bowed, and soon disappeared into the far off trees, leaving Gilles alone in the close, unnatural stillness of the natural surroundings. He stood uncomfortably for a few moments,

searching with all senses for something familiar, and when he heard one of the HVAC units switch on overhead, felt better.

The sucking sound of an opened door issued from behind him and a voice said, "Sir...?"

He allowed himself to be ushered into the building, heart rate coming slowly under control as his eyes adjusted to the ache of the overhead lighting. The man who held the door for him retreated behind the reception desk. He was a powerfully built black man, the lines of his hair and spine both straight as a razor, and moved as though he patrolled his domain. Gilles moved to join him at the desk, set his bag down on the floor, and retrieved his wallet.

"Gilles Guattari, here to see Marcus Genaro, please," he said softly, seeking to minimize the violation his voice must do to the pristine silence of the audience chamber. He passed his driver license over the countertop.

"Very well, sir," the receptionist boomed, voice echoing through the room. He picked up an old-fashioned telephone and spoke into the handset, though Gilles missed what he said, finding his attention distracted by a coffee cup on the desk emblazoned with the text "US ARMY."

"Mr. Genaro will be out shortly, sir."

He had the voice of a singer, fit to command an auditorium.

"I'll just have a seat..." Gilles said and collected his bag.

"Very good, sir."

He heard the sound of typing; heavy fingers impacting the keyboard like little bombs. Gilles sat rigidly in a chair across from a large framed picture of a huge white rocket, bulbous tip jutting proudly over an explosion of smoke and chemical hellfire. The title at the bottom of the picture said, "*Falcon X*." He thought about this for a moment and wondered if Anagnorisis had anything to do with that program. He could not remember encountering any such intelligence during his mad research spree on the flight over.

"Do you desire the WIFI, sir?"

"Uh...no thank you, I'm fine."

The man nodded in such a way that Gilles felt as if he passed a test.

A few minutes later the receptionist lifted the phone to his ear and said, "Yes, sir." Then he hung it up and said, "You'll be required to leave your phone and laptop up front, sir."

"Oh..." Gilles said, glancing down at his bag. "Umm...darn. I'm technically not to let this laptop out of my sight..."

"I see. Are you permitted to lock it in a safe, as in when you're in a hotel and wish to leave for dinner?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

The man nodded. "That's fine, then, sir. Please come around the desk."

Gilles was led to a hallway just out of sight of the main entrance. They came to a heavy looking door, and the man waved a badge in front of the handle before stepping through to hold it open. On the other side, there was a small room with a line of push-button box safes along one wall.

"Pick a unit not currently occupied, sir, and place any and all electronic devices within. Set a combination you can remember, please. I cannot open the safe for you without a high-priority override. *Please... do not make us go through the paperwork for that.*"

He was left alone in the small space.

Gilles emerged into the reception area a few moments later, feeling oddly naked without his briefcase. Marcus was there waiting for him on the other side of the counter, hands thrust distractedly into pockets. His expression suggested he was not entirely sure if anything he now did had a point.

"Good morning, Mr. Genaro," Gilles said, holding out a hand.

Marcus snorted lightly, offered a token shake, and grunted, "Morning. You all signed in? Got your crap unloaded?"

"Ah, yes. I was wondering if I could beg the use of a notebook, though? I'll need to take some notes while I'm here, I should think."

"*Beg the use?*" Marcus asked slowly.

"Yes... To...to take notes."

Marcus smiled through tightened lips and said, "Yeah, no worries. You'll find everything you need within. You'll have to leave it behind when you leave, though."

"I can't take my notes home with me in the evening?"

"Yeah, no. That's bad mojo, Doc. Did, uh, did you not read that part in your NDA?"

"I missed it apparently..." Gilles muttered.

"Huh. No big deal; we'll keep an eye on you to make sure you don't incriminate yourself. Come on, let's head back."

"Uh..."

Marcus stopped and looked back at him. "Uh?"

"Can... I call my wife? She only has my cell number to get a hold of me. I'd like to leave a number for her to call if she needs me."

Marcus smiled again. The corners of his mouth pulled down instead of up, and Gilles wondered if that was his natural expression or if Genaro reserved it only for those occasions where he wished his guests to feel uneasy. Still smiling, he glanced at the man behind the desk and said, "Sam?"

The old-fashioned, black phone was placed on the high counter at Gilles's elbow.

“The number’s on the handset, sir,” Sam said.

Marcus strolled to the inner door to wait while Gilles punched in his wife’s number. It went to voicemail, so he whispered, “Hey, Babe, just calling to let you know that you can’t get me on my cell while I’m out here, their security is, uh, pretty next level, hah-ha. So, if you need to get a hold of me, you’ll want to dial... uh, let’s see... eight, umm... eight-four-five...two-five-eight... Uh... two-five-zero-zero. That’ll be the front desk, then you just ask for me. See you later. Love you, bye.”

He passed the phone back to Sam, nodded, and met Marcus at the door.

“All set?”

“Yes, thank you,” Gilles nodded.

“Yahtzee...” he said, and badged into a cubicle farm of middling size, divided by a wide center aisle leading straight through to a set of double doors at the far end. Gilles paused for a moment to take in the scenery before he realized that Marcus was already halfway across the floor and showing no signs of waiting up. He trotted across the gray carpeted floor, catching up to the other man just as he opened the double-doors.

“I thought you might be giving me a desk in here or something,” Gilles said lamely.

“No,” Marcus said quietly. When the doors shut, he cleared his throat and said, “You don’t want to be in there. That’s where the goons go. Your spot’s in the lab, where the action is.” He turned and proceeded down the hall, muttering under his breath as he went. It sounded to Gilles as though he said something along the lines of “... *where we can keep an eye on you...*” but he could not be sure.

There was a long corridor on the other side of the double doors, stretching toward a distant vanishing point before making an abrupt right turn. The yellow-green linoleum tiles were heavily polished and the gleam from the overhead lights reflected in their surface, seeming to float along with him as he walked like wisps. The corridor itself was wide enough for six to walk abreast and walled on either side at regular intervals with large glass cabinets showcasing past successes. Many of these were awards granted by some governing body or other and some housed engineering curiosities of varying complexity. Gilles opened his mouth to inquire after one of these but was soon distracted by a long, gorgeously lit case running the remaining length of the left wall. Housed within were a series of automata, starting at a squat, six-wheeled probe reminiscent of a planetary rover, then progressing through a series of technological iterations depending from that antecedent; six wheels graduating to treads; treads replaced with a quadrupedal base; quadrupedal base devolving to two treads and a

tertiary caster with upright chassis and top-mounted camera. Finally, at the end of the line, a mechanical humanoid androgyne, indistinguishable in feature, with great, blunt weights for hands at the end of stunted arms and long, sweeping piston legs.

“Gilles? You okay?”

He had stopped to stare. “Yes. I just remember seeing this a few years back; it was all over the news when it beat Kinsley in the four-hundred.”

Marcus laughed. “Sure, that was fun.”

“Yeah, fun’s one way to describe it...” Gilles muttered. He leaned in closer to the glass. “Is this the actual...?”

“The unit that ran the race? That’s it.”

Gilles shook his head. He leaned away from the glass to wipe at the patch of fog he had exhaled onto the surface. Buffing the spot with his shirt cuff, he whispered, “So... beat an Olympian, and they lock you under glass...”

He pulled his hand away from the casing and looked for any signs of streaking. The surface seemed as clear as it was likely to get with the tools available to him; clear enough for him to read the model designation along the chest plate.

“HERMES.”

“I’ll confess a soft spot for Greek mythology,” Marcus said. “Should we continue on now?”

“Sorry,” Gilles said, and followed him around the bend.

As they walked, Marcus slowed to fall in beside him. He seemed on the verge of speaking, yet hesitated. Curious, Gilles opened his mouth to ask what it was about, but Marcus blurted, “I’m abrupt, sometimes, Gilles. I think we covered that yesterday.”

“Yes.”

“A part of that comes, I think, from an inherent distaste for wasting time.”

“I see. You believe your time is being wasted now?”

“Yours too,” Marcus said, gesturing vaguely in his direction. “Look, Kevin... Kevin has a lot of pie-in-the-sky ideas, you see. He’s a doctorate in theoretical physics; they get like that, no offense. I think a guy like that ends up spending too much time in the theoretical realm...well, he gets disconnected, if you take my meaning. Theory’s all well and good, I suppose, but a theory only stands up for as long as you keep your hands out of the nuts and bolts of the system, you know? Guys like you and me, we get our hands in the guts of things. Yeah, I know you’re a doc as well, same as Roth, but you’ve kept your hands in the guts. So you’ll understand. Theory only survives until you get your hands dirty, and start finding all those places that the theory fails. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“I’m not quite sure...”

Marcus sighed. “Kevin wants this thing evaluated, Gilles, for a lot of different reasons, some of which don’t make a great deal of sense—at least not to me. He’s worried about public opinion, legacy, ethics, all that shit. As he should be, mind you; he has to be worried about those things at his level. But between you and me? I think he believes it, man.”

He stopped before a solid door and pointed at its center.

“I think he believes the system we built in there is awake. Or if he doesn’t believe it, he damned well wants to, in which case I don’t know what the hell to say. I don’t know how to deal with someone who wants to believe a thing. Seems to me the argument’s half over in that case and a guy like me, the voice of reason, is just pushing a big rock uphill.”

Without thinking, Gilles said, “You and he have had more than a few arguments over this, haven’t you?”

The conciliatory look disappeared. “Look, Gilles. You and I are wrench-turners. Maybe you don’t put your hands in hardware like I do, but that’s no real difference. We both build things. Me and my team; we built that thing in there. And I’m here to tell you that at no point did we write a ‘soul’ routine into the framework.”

“But you didn’t write any routines, did you? The high-level processing... that was all trained over time, wasn’t it? Most of the actual programming would have been the lower-level platform on which it rides.”

Marcus grunted derisively. He put his hand over the door latch but did not open it. “I have a few things to get to, Gilles. I guess you’ll want to head in there and have a look. Keep an eye on that belief of yours, huh? A man in your, ah, current position...I don’t imagine your career could afford any further embarrassment.”

He pulled the door open and held it.

Gilles waited a few moments while his heart pounded. His mind had collapsed into a jumble of confusion at the shock and subsequent anger that last comment had ignited. Control and calm were the main things; he detested the lack of mental clarity he suffered in situations like this. It had been quite some time since anyone had dared to call him out so blatantly. Interviews and hearings were another animal altogether; one could prepare for those. Marcus had just perpetrated a direct attack. The suggestion read like a threat, of course, but Gilles recognized the interplay beneath the words, the vying for position. How he responded would decide the outcome and, unfortunately, he was rattled with anger enough that he had no rejoinder.

He settled for a draw.

“Is there any command cheat sheet I’ll need in there? What kind of

interface am I dealing with? Voice?"

Marcus's smile widened, mouth corners drawing down to collar bones. "Head on in. You'll figure it out plenty quick."

Gilles stepped into an antechamber large enough to house a small folding table, security guard, and a full body scanner. The guard was relaxed in a chair reading an old fashioned book when Gilles closed the door; he was standing when Gilles turned around again, the book having disappeared.

"Doctor Guattari?" asked the guard.

"Gilles, please. You are...?" He extended a hand.

Brief shadow of confusion along the guard's face replaced immediately by a naked smile. He shook with Gilles and gestured at the scanner. "Simmons, sir. You've seen these in airports, of course. Same drill, sir, just have your hands up and out of the way."

Gilles cleared his throat as he eyed the device. "I opt for the pat-downs. I dislike being...scrutinized."

"Different situation here, sir," the guard said. "No human employee is reviewing the imagery. It's all automated, and the scan's never saved to file. I'm the only one in here, you see? There's no one back in the cubicle."

Gilles craned his neck to glance behind the unit and said, "Yeah, I remember when they said that about the airport scanners..."

"We're not the airport, sir. I'll go stand out in the hall if it makes you feel more comfortable."

"And if I just skipped the scanner altogether?" asked Gilles.

"Well, then the door wouldn't unlock."

He glanced back at the machine again and sighed. "Go ahead and stay."

"Very well, sir. When you're ready, then."

Gilles stepped into the machine and raised his hands. It made no sound that he could hear, which was in itself deafening, and when the heavy click fired off to his left, he jerked back a good foot.

"That's the door, sir. You may step through now."

Gilles nodded his thanks and approached the hatch. There was no moving handle anywhere on it; only a recession under which he could hook his fingers and pull.

"What do you guys do if there's a fire?" he asked, staring at the word "CRONUS" stenciled above the frame.

"There's a panic switch on the other side of the door. Big red button; you can't miss it. It kills the power to the mag-lock, and the door will just swing right open after that. Don't hit that button, okay? Set's off a building-wide alarm if you do."

"Understood," Gilles nodded.

He pulled the hatch open.



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The room reminded Gilles of a dark cavern. It yawned like a cavern; like a gullet falling down into the hungry earth. Lights activated in sequence along the ceiling, starting at the door and flicking back row by row until he could see the other side. The space was long and deep, filled with lab benches covered in ESD mats on top of which sat clusters of monitors, a few paper notebooks, scattered pens and pencils, and the odd wrench or screwdriver. Along the right wall were shelves holding plastic bins of various size. The door shut heavily behind him, and when the locking mechanism engaged, he felt his ears pop.

It took Gilles a while to understand why the walls and ceiling of that room shined; he didn't notice, at first, that they were composed of rolled steel, or that the seams between each panel were covered in strips of copper tape.

The thing at the far end of the room had captured his attention the way nothing he had encountered in all the days of his life running up to that moment had; not the first sight of Annalise in her wedding dress nor the first time he had seen her clothed in nothing at all. He approached it slowly, his mouth hanging open like a forgotten cabinet.

It hung from the ceiling on an articulated arm, the terminus of which anchored upward into its lower back following a final acute joint. Hydraulics seemed to run the length of that arm...no, no they weren't hydraulics. Gilles saw a gearbox along one of the shafts. Worm gear, then. The top of the arm depended from a rod spanning the width of the lab—something that very much resembled a linear stage actuator—and when he looked along the room's left wall, he saw the complimentary actuator for the opposing axis.

The thing itself (the torso, arms, and head) floated legless over the floor. Looking closer, Gilles could see that its hands had five fingers, like his, and that they appeared to be composed of an equal number of joints. The whole of it was encased in some sort of polymer shell, gray in color, which absorbed the light of the room and reflected none back as if the light itself was being devoured by the thing's presence. A collection of thin, purple cables bundled into a mass as thick as Gilles's wrist crept from the back of its head, wound up the arm from which the body hung, and was managed along the rod of the linear actuator, where it disappeared through a copper-taped port in the ceiling. As Gilles moved closer, he saw that its eyes were pure black, like pits of oil.

"Good morning," said the lab. The voice resonated from all directions, rich and deep. "What is your name, please?"

Looking around the room, searching for speakers and finding none, he stuttered, "Uh...G-Gilles. Guattari."

"Gilles Guattari," the voice rumbled. "An alliterative name. French in origin; are you French in origin, Gilles Guattari?"

"Yes, my family hailed from Pontoise, I understand. I'm sorry... could you...? Your voice is rather... do you know?"

The body at the end of the room came alive. The head lifted and tracked to his position, and though the expression had not changed (could not change, it seemed to Gilles), a certain intelligence was now present where before there was none. The overhead bar began to scroll along the ceiling in his direction, bringing the truncated form toward him like hung beef pushed along a freezer track. The same voice, now small, originated from the thing itself.

"Is this better, Gilles Guattari?"

"Very much so, thank you. Your... mouth doesn't move when you speak..." He leaned slowly to one side to see it in profile, but the head moved to follow him.

"My mouth does not move, Gilles Guattari."

"Would you call me Gilles, please?"

"Yes, Gilles."

"Thank you." He took a deep breath and shook out his hands, which buzzed with pins and needles. He tried to circle around the body, but it rotated to follow him. "Would you stop turning, please?"

The body froze.

"Thank you. I was hoping to get a look at your other side... you don't mind, do you?"

"No, Gilles, I do not mind. You should know, however, that you are not actually looking at me."

"Oh, no?" he said absently. He lifted onto his toes to get a closer look at the bundle coming out of the head. "Good heavens, this is all fiber..."

"No, Gilles, this is not me. Yes, the primary transmission medium of the sensory apparatus is fiber optic cable."

Gilles came back around to face it head-on.

"What do I call you?"

"The project engineers of Anagnorisis Technologies have designated me Cronus. You may refer to me as Cronus, Gilles."

"I see," he said. The shock was beginning to wear off; the unsteady vision of a body suspended from a meat hook suddenly coming alive faded until only his interest remained. "May I sit in one of these chairs?"

"You may sit, Gilles."

He wheeled over a lab chair, listening distractedly to the tinkle of its grounding chain as it skittered over the floor. He sat, noted how he

had to crane his neck to look up at Cronus, and then stood briefly to squeeze the handle that would elevate the seat. It rose only an inch, so he sighed and sat back down.

The machine looked down at him silently, arms limp. There was a pause of perhaps a few seconds, followed by the slow whir of the suspension arm as Cronus rotated to face Gilles and then lowered until their heads were level.

“Is that better, Gilles?”

“I... yes, thank you.”

He sat there staring at the expressionless face. The body had become completely motionless, looking as though it had gone back to sleep. There was no physical mechanism within the eyes that rotated in any way that Gilles could see, though he suspected they might be lenses of some sort. There were no seams in the face; no hinge or joint he could detect. He ducked slightly to look beneath the chin, at which point the head tilted back obligingly, exposing a speaker embedded in the throat under the jawline.

“If this is not... uh... you, then where are *you*?” asked Gilles.

“The structures most closely associated with me are located beneath you. These include the high-level quantum core, the intermediary layer, and the low-level silicon imperative systems.”

“What am I interacting with now?” Gilles asked.

“A sensory apparatus. It is the primary means by which I interact with the physical world.”

Gilles looked around the lab. “You use these computers?”

“Doing so would be needlessly inefficient, Gilles. The computers have been placed here by the project engineers for the purposes of their own diagnostic analysis.”

*Jesus Christ, had that been pride he just heard?*

He shook his head and breathed deeply. A few minutes in and he was already anthropomorphizing what amounted to a multi-billion dollar science experiment. He had to watch that.

“Do you know why I’m here, uh, *Cronus*?”

“Your services have been engaged by Kevin Roth for the purposes of determining if the system designated as Cronus has attained a level of cognizance commensurate with certain rights and liberties not commonly enjoyed by less developed systems.”

Gilles nodded to himself and muttered, “That’s one way to put it...”

“What is another way to put it?”

He looked back up at the machine... the sensory apparatus... and stared a long time at the frozen face. It looked like it had been chiseled from ice. He began to wonder what he was searching for; if he looked for emotion or perhaps something just beneath emotion’s

foundation, unnameable and intangible. He clenched his fist, burying the nails into the palm.

“That’s the only way to put it, I suppose.”

Cronus did not respond.

“Why doesn’t your mouth move when you speak?”

“It was a function deemed unnecessary by the engineering team responsible for building this apparatus. A mouth moves so that it may shape sound waves, process air, or consume nutrients. These functions are superfluous in my case.”

Gilles leaned unconsciously in his chair, looking over the visage from different angles. “Why give you a face, then?”

“The lack of a face is considered distracting by many. Would you like to see?”

He forced his hand to relax and straightened in his chair. The thing did not move; not so much as a cock of the head. “Uh, yes, certainly.”

Mechanical hands lifted to its face. The motion was smooth yet not as natural as the action of a human arm—too smooth, in fact. The abundance of precision made it uncanny. Gilles watched as the thumbs wedged under the ridge of the chin and flexed. There was a hollow, plastic pop, and then the entire face and scalp were lifted away from the head, exposing a geometric frame of pencil-thin aluminum spars fencing a riot of cable running in every conceivable direction. He could see that the eyes were, in fact, lenses of a sort, extending to long barrels anchoring at a common processor module. The head rotated to different attitudes for his benefit, and he saw how any illusion of humanity was eradicated in the under-structure’s exposure.

“Is this sufficient?” the machine asked.

“Yes... yes, I understand now. Almost insectile.”

“Would you like me to replace the cosmetic?”

Shrugging, Gilles said, “What would you prefer?”

“I prefer neither. The difference does not impact my function.”

Gilles nodded. “Replace it, then.”

As the face clicked back into place, Gilles looked around the lab and said, “This is just a big Faraday cage, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“You’ve stopped addressing me by name. You continuously did so at first. Why have you stopped?”

“Excessive repetition of a person’s name is often interpreted as an aggressive or combative posture. You have addressed me by name. I have determined from this that it is now permissible to omit yours.”

“Wait... wait. You understood that this usage of a person’s name is interpreted in this way, yet you did it, and you... stopped because I used yours?”

“You have used it to address me.”

Gilles stood from the chair and cast about the room for a notebook. He found one on the next bench over and skipped across the floor to grab it, noting as he did the whirl of motors as Cronus rotated to follow him.

“That is the logbook of Miss Parva Anand,” the machine supplied.

Gilles flipped through several pages of fine, precise notation until he found the point at which the blank leaves began. Then he upset an array of loose papers and tools on the bench until he uncovered a pen and began to scribble furiously in the book.

“You will not be able to take that out of here with you.”

“I know...” Gilles muttered, writing so fast the letters were incomprehensible. “I just need to compose my thoughts. Writing them down will help me to memorize them. Please apologize to Miss Anand for me the next time you see her.”

“I will see her soon. I will apologize for you when I see her.”

Gilles studied the notes he had scribbled for several seconds, trying to steady himself and figure out what the hell he might do next.

“You were asking about the shielded nature of this room,” Cronus prompted.

Gilles looked up at it, mouth open, and then wrote a few more notes in the margin. He circled one of them, underlined it several times, and finally stabbed the paper with the nib. “I was, wasn’t I? I guess my first question is *why*? We’ve established that the...erm... apparatus I’m addressing now is little more than a focal point, and all the parts of you that matter most are outside of this area.”

“You have correctly intuited that the shielding is for the purposes of security, but you have failed to understand the intent. It is not to keep the world out. It is to keep data from leaving this room. Also, what you see before you is much more than a focal point.”

“You mean cell or wireless?”

“That is correct.”

Gilles glanced back at the hatch. “After all the scanning outside? How would I even get a device in here?”

“Multiple redundancy is a cornerstone of any reliable system.”

He laughed, supposing that was so.

“May I ask how you will now proceed?”

Gilles froze. “Yes. Why would you ask that question, though?”

“I would ask a question to know the answer.”

“Well, yes, but why would you wish to know the answer?”

“The term that best fits my reason for making this inquiry is ‘curiosity.’”

“Jesus Christ...” whispered Gilles.

“You are writing at a speed that defeats precision. Doing so is

unnecessary. I will wait.”

“Yes, no. Of course... thank you. No... I just... I have to get this down.”

“You are agitated.”

“No,” Gilles shook his head. “No, I don’t think I’d call it that.” He put down the pen and looked up at the gray face. “If I’m being honest, I’m a little off-script right now.”

“What does it mean to be off-script?”

“It means I had a plan but, having soon discovered that plan to be totally pointless, I’m now making things up as I go.”

“Then what was your original plan?”

Gilles winced. “Well... I guess you’d call it a modified Turing test.”

“I fail to understand the applicability. There are many less advanced systems today that pass this test easily. The first documented instance of this test being passed was in 2014.”

“I know, I know,” Gilles nodded, returning to his chair. He clicked the plunger on the pen repeatedly with his thumb. “I guess you could say I was trying to establish a performance baseline with you; Marcus and Kevin haven’t really given me a great deal to work from. The problem here is that you basically blew the test away without even trying in the first couple of minutes. I’m not sure where to go from here.”

“It would seem more preparation is appropriate.”

“Heh-heh. I don’t know. Nobody really told me what I’d be walking into here. I have a little catching up to do.”

Something caught Gilles’s attention, though he could not say for sure what it might be. He thought the position of the body changed, perhaps only slightly. Such a minimal thing, if it were so, yet... such a potentially monumental signal.

“How would you like to begin catching up?”

“Could we spend some time talking about how you’re constructed?”

*“The sensory apparatus is, according to the machine (hereinafter referred to as Cronus), in no way a constituent part of its makeup. It seems to regard this portion of itself as little more than a peripheral.*

*“Additionally, I must stress here that I choose to refer to Cronus utilizing the third-person, singular neuter ‘It’ exclusively for the purposes of not confusing or otherwise clouding the investigation. If I’m to take a crack at this as seriously as I now think it deserves, that level of objectivity is critical.*

*“The inclusion of the sensory apparatus, what I’ll now call the Body, was a design feature of the system from the outset of the program. It is, in fact, tied into the foundational theory behind the system’s emergent function. That Cronus does not refer to this portion of the system as its true self is, for me, the most provocative detail encountered thus far.*

*“Before exploring the overall design of the system, I must here define the reason for its existence. It comes down to mountain climbing; or rather, that compulsion which leads us as a people to consider mountain climbing a worthwhile activity. I asked the head engineer on the project, Marcus Genaro, why they would invest so much time and effort into building this thing. He answered, ‘To see if we could, obviously.’ Apparently for a man like Mr. Genaro, the eradication of the limitations imposed by the now-obsolete first generation of quantum computers (not the least among these being their ungovernable size as necessitated by the underlying cooling systems and coaxial ganglia of the microwave resonators coupled with their poor coherence times) opens an intoxicating new realm of scientific investigation. Given the achievements of Mr. Roth’s team in the field of CNT synthesis—namely in the generation of such structures measuring at great distances (I’m cautioned the maximum length they can attain is still a closely guarded secret) while maintaining good areal density, as well as the integration of these structures into photonic resonators, it seems the first thing Marcus wanted to tackle was the simulation (or perhaps approximation) of a biological processor.*

*“Or, more succinctly put, he wanted to build a brain. When I examined him on the subject, he’d commented on what he referred to as the failed Blue Brain Project. As he described it, the project had its merits but attempting to achieve the goal on a classical architecture was not dissimilar from trying to fly to the Moon on a tricycle.*

*“I’ll note here that we briefly discussed the paper I wrote several years*

ago, specifically the parallels between the guesses I made at the time and what they actually attempted with the Cronus project. I'm not sure if there was an implication that this paper in some way influenced their design; I certainly can't tell in my discussions with Marcus. He can be a difficult man to read.

"I should also mention that he very firmly believes that Cronus is, at most, a complex machine now being 'humanized' by well-meaning albeit 'delusional feelists'—that's his own unique word; the 'feelists' thing.

"So, the architecture of this system is as follows (in incredibly simplified terms): the quantum component, which is itself vast, sits atop a classical silicon processor base. The silicon portion of the system is responsible for all I/O, automatic or autonomic low-level functions, and for driving all hardwired imperatives. Hardwired imperatives are, in this case, to be likened to the biological, hormonal equivalent; hunger, reproduction, comfort, safety, aversion to danger and pain, and so on. They are, in the case of Cronus, greatly simplified. Attempting to simulate such functions as pain, sex, and hunger—while perhaps an interesting exercise—would have been a pointless addition of complexity.

"I actually questioned Cronus on the subject of food when this topic came up. I asked him: if mechanical equivalents to certain biological drives have been implemented, would hunger not have made sense? Could the assimilation of energy not act as a standin for this process?

"Cronus answered (and I paraphrase): anything could be made to be so, but it has not. I have not been given the drive for such an activity. Therefore there is no pleasure derived from its consumption.

"I must admit, its use of the term 'pleasure' shocked the hell out of me until he explained that pleasure is only an equivalent term. It's these hardwired imperatives. Cronus has certain low-level needs that they (the engineers) have chosen to simulate at the silicon, or classical, level. We can say that Cronus feels 'pleasure' at the acquisition of new information because, at a very low level, logic has been enacted to produce certain signals up to the quantum strata when new cross-referential pathways are formed. We wouldn't understand it as pleasure, as in the pleasant feeling of chills in encountering a hot bath or the tip of a tongue rolled overexposed skin, but for the system, this is presumably the best term we have at our disposal.

"The machine assimilates certain information and the relational structures of the quantum landscape change. The silicon under-layer senses this, which sends a sympathetic signal to the higher functions, which then respond by utilizing the I/O partition of the lower system to go out and do it all again. It may not sound terribly erotic when expressed in these terms, and yet one may liken this activity to the post-coital secretion of dopamine.

"The Body of this system was added as yet another means of data assimilation. Much as a baby first begins its development by exploring the



world around it, this prosthesis was added as a means to give the system a way to interact with and learn about the physical environment. There is no cognitive function housed within the Body, here, that's important to mention. There are classical processors fitted inside the chassis, but they are there only to interpret and relay the information provided by the onboard sensors of the Body via fiber channel to the low-level I/O layer. In addition, Cronus is also capable of pulling limited information from the internet; apparently, its access is fire-walled so that it may only see the world via pre-approved, white-listed material.

*"This is an interesting thought: assume for a minute that this...what it is Roth suspects it to be...is real, that this machine has attained some level of sentience—might the aforementioned walled-garden approach to data access be akin to torture? They've added an in-built imperative for the machine to always reach for more information and then restricted the flow to a trickle. If the satisfaction of that drive is akin to pleasure, is the confounding of that same drive a kind of starvation? Or suffocation?"*

*"Also of note, Cronus (at the quantum level) is apparently not capable of reading binary data directly; it operates on a visual baseline. All interaction with the world began with video feeds from the body, therefore this is apparently the foundation from which further learning proceeds. In the case of web content, the silicon layer produces a rendered image of the page and then sends it along to the quantum core in the same way that data from the body's binocular video feed is preprocessed and forwarded. Probably need to look into this; it suggests the ability to read. Can that function act as a standin for speech as an indicator of—"*

Gilles was disturbed by the click of the hotel room door's electric lock. He looked up from his laptop in time to see it open and admit Annalise into the front sitting area. She seemed somehow very far away, due in part to the distance between the writing desk and the door. The size of the room was not the only reason.

"Hello," he said softly.

She set some things down on the coffee table—her purse and a number of small plastic souvenir bags. She halved the distance between them and stopped in the middle of the room, right side of her body painted blue-white by the city lights, and whispered, "Why is it so dark in here?"

"Sorry... lights," he said.

When the nightlife of the outside world was overpowered by the room's own artificial warmth, he explained, "The sun was still up when I sat down to work. I guess I didn't pay attention."

"How long have you been here?"

"Honestly, I have no idea."

She cocked her head and scratched lightly under her jaw—a common expression in scenarios such as this.

“Well, why didn't you call me? We could have gone out together. I went up to the top of the Empire State Building today; you need to come see it with me. Do you know you can feel that building sway through the sky? It gets blown around by the wind!”

She came to stand directly before the desk. Her cheeks and nose were flushed a rosy pink, eyes as wide and beautifully inviting as the girl he had first met. “Why didn't you call?” she asked again.

There was a hidden tone in her voice that stabbed at his heart, a certain hurt for lost precious time never to be regained, and he gestured helplessly at the screen. “You wouldn't believe these guys,” he said. “I'm not allowed near this laptop nor my phone when I'm in the lab, and any notes I take I must leave behind. They won't even let me take hand-written notes out of there at the end of the day. So I'm forced to write down ideas as I work and then write them all down a second time once I get out home.”

“That's idiotic. Don't they know that you'll do this?”

“Yes!” he nearly shouted. “Yes, I told them that very same thing! They seemed to think it was as idiotic as you and I, and yet their policy is what it is. I half get the feeling their engineers are held hostage by their own security group.”

“Oh, well good,” Anna said, sitting down in a nearby chair. “I'd hate to think I was asking another dumb question...”

“No, no, no! It usually takes the naïveté of an outsider to see such idiocies so clearly.”

“So...” her gaze lowered to the laptop, darkened, and darted away. “Now you're on that thing again, and I've lost you for the evening.”

“No,” he repeated. “I just have to get these ideas down, and I'm done.”

“You said the nights would belong to me,” she prodded.

“Baby, I know, just... please. Allow me to finish this thought, and we'll go. We'll stay out as late as you please.”

“When will you be done?”

“Soon, I promise. I can feel the candle beginning to flicker even now.”

She gave it some thought and finally nodded. “Okay. But hurry up. I haven't had dinner yet, and I'm getting hungry.”

“Absolutely,” he said, and she rose to visit the bathroom. He watched her as she walked away, then returned his attention to the keyboard.

*“Other complexities obfuscate the issue. The underlying design of the machine makes it difficult to define a simplistic answer with regard to cognition. If the integration and synthesis of vocal communication happened within the quantum core, I should think that this would all be a good deal easier. After all, the ability to communicate is one of the greatest*

indicators of consciousness we have. There is a reason that the Turing test used to be the gold standard for general intelligence.

*“Unfortunately, all language processing and language synthesis occurs at the low level in classical silicon, preserving the expensive quantum core for more complex operations. We had specialist AI systems built on classical processors capable of passing the Turing test years ago, and those were based on neural network models first realized in the eighties! So, sadly, the ability to communicate must be ruled out here as a convenient indicator.*

*“I’ve been going around in circles all night trying to determine some way to reason an answer out of this problem; in effect to find the appropriate word game/passphrase combination that, when uttered by this system...this machine... proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that something has emerged here that is higher than just intelligent simulation. How much higher... I haven’t the first clue. I suppose I must first produce a working definition of consciousness and then backtrack from there, seeing if I can, essentially, find some way for the definition and the machine to meet in the middle.*

*“And then I guess I’ll need to find some way to present it that the entire world doesn’t just laugh me into obscurity...”*

The screen of his phone lit suddenly, and the thing itself vibrated merrily along the desktop. Gilles leaned over to read the number. It was unfamiliar. However, he recognized the area code as being local. He swiped open the call and said, “Hello?”

“Is this Gilles?” requested a soft, electronic voice.

“Mr. Roth!” he blurted. “Yes, yes it is. What can I do for you?”

He was distracted by the manifestation of Anna in the doorway. A disconnected partition of his mind noted she was halfway through the process of applying makeup.

“I was hoping I could get you to come out and have a bite to eat this evening. I, uh, wanted to get your initial impressions.”

“Well... yes, I don’t see why not,” Gilles said, glancing at the laptop screen. “We haven’t had any dinner yet, so...”

“We?”

“Yes, my wife and I. We could both do with a bite, I imagine.” He muted his phone and whispered to Anna, “How would you like to meet someone famous?”

“Not at all, honestly...” she muttered.

He pursed his lips and un-muted the phone. Kevin was in the middle of responding.

“... don’t think that works, Gilles. I’d wanted to discuss the project with you in detail and... well, she can’t hear any of that, right? You did sign, after all...”

“Yes, of course,” Gilles said quickly.

"You haven't discussed any of this with her so far, have you?"

"Of course not!" he assured him.

"Well, that's good then. But if you two already had plans, we can do something different, of course. I could drive out to the lab tomorrow and take a lunch with you?"

"No... no, that's not necessary. You must be incredibly busy. No, we can do this now. It's probably best anyway; I need help to compose my thoughts and figure out how to proceed. I don't mind telling you that your little project has put me far off balance."

"That's fine, Gilles, I'd suspected it might. But... you're sure this is okay? Don't cancel plans on my account."

"No, it's alright. It's, uh, it's why I'm out here, isn't it? You folks are paying me enough; I'd probably better be available when called." He tried a laugh, but it fell abruptly to the floor.

"Oh, well... we don't like to talk about that, Gilles."

"Of course, of course," Gilles said quickly. He suppressed a coughing fit and said, "Please... excuse..."

"Don't mention it."

"Where should I meet you," he asked after clearing his throat several times.

"Head down to the front desk and have them call you a cab. Then tell your driver you want to go to Edi and The Wolf. They'll take it from there. Bring your appetite."

They exchanged a few final pleasantries, and Gilles hung up. He looked at his laptop for a few seconds before saving and closing the file, and then glanced at the door into their bedroom. It was empty.

He heard water running in the bathroom.

Edi and the Wolf was a casual restaurant out in the East Village, in appearance and atmosphere every bit the opposite of what Gilles expected. He took one look at how the patrons were dressed when he stepped through the door, squinting through the sudden low, orange light to do so, and after a moment's thought he removed his tie and stuffed it into a jacket pocket.

The place was rough and convoluted in unexpected, delightful ways and the décor seemed to Gilles to be at war with itself—a collision of refinement and rusticism. Most of the rooms had ceilings planked in old, weather-beaten boards, as though he walked within the belly of an ancient frigate, and the environment permeated a feeling of warmth though his shoes clacked hollowly on a tile floor. The walls were nothing but windows allowing in the coldness of the nearby East River. Flowers and plants everywhere, lining the tops of the walls; in the corner, a bucket stuffed with peacock feathers for no reason at all; an old boot on the copper bar top vomiting up yet more flowers. Darkness and candlelight and warmth—tones of brown and

yellow and orange and good earth.

He found Kevin at the bar. He waved and stood to greet Gilles, then returned to his stool and gestured at his martini.

"Will you drink with me?"

"Oh, I don't see why not," he said and looked upward at coils of rope as thick as his forearm. They looped and looped along the ceiling planks like giant nooses, describing the perimeter of the bar beneath them. "I suppose a glass of whatever their house wine happens to be might do?"

Kevin nodded at the bartender, and even though she had been darting constantly behind the board like a hummingbird, she nodded back as if she had heard all.

"Do you like Austrian food?" Kevin asked.

"I must admit my experience is limited."

"I see. Well, if you'll permit me: the schnitzel is quite something."

Gilles nodded and took up the wine glass that had materialized at his elbow. After a tentative sip, Kevin asked, "Well? You've had your first encounter. What do you think?"

Gilles sighed heavily and thought a moment. "It's... It's perhaps the most amazing thing I've ever encountered. And maybe I'm shooting myself in the foot by admitting this but... I am completely overwhelmed."

"I'd be concerned if you were not, honestly."

Gilles shrugged, shook his head, and took another drink.

"But this is clearly bothering you..." Kevin prodded.

"I've been driving myself crazy trying to come around to some way of determining...you know..."

"Perhaps you'd better say it," Kevin said. He was smiling, and the softness of his manner and of his lips was strangely shy and feminine despite the bristle at his cheeks and the thinness of his hair. It was a look that hid either compassion or mischief, and Gilles found it at once magnetic and disturbing as if the draw of this man's gentle charisma exposed a failing within his own character; a certain receptivity to moods hitherto unconsidered.

He straightened on his stool and said, "Consciousness. We're trying to figure out if this thing is conscious, aren't we? As in for-real, Asimov-level, no-shit conscious."

Kevin laughed loudly at this, taken by surprise, and nodded. "I suppose that's so."

"Well, we may be setting ourselves up for a fall, here. We as a people don't really understand the phenomenon of consciousness in any meaningful way. What we have is a basic idea of what the condition entails... and that's about it."

Kevin wrinkled his forehead at this statement and took a sip from

his drink. "I suppose the fields of psychology and psychiatry have no interest in the subject at all?"

"You joke, but you're more right than you realize. There's a famous saying in that field, Kevin. It goes 'the study of consciousness is all well and good, but by God, get tenure first!' We can observe conscious behavior and make observations about it but there is to date no scientific definition for the state of consciousness, and there are significant reasons why. First, the physicality of it defeats us. I can point to a heart, okay, and define what it is that the organ does. It's simple; a muscle that pumps blood through the body, full stop. There's no guessing there, no supposition as to underlying function or intent. The body needs fresh, oxygenated blood for the delivery of nutrients, and so forth, and the heart is very clearly what makes that happen.

"Now consider the brain. We know that certain areas of the brain seem to control certain functions. If we scoop out a bit of material from one area, a person suddenly forgets how to talk. If a lesion forms in another, maybe motor functions are impaired. The mechanics of these things make sense to us.

"What about if you wish to move your arm? That's also comparatively simple. A sequence of neurons fire, originating in your brain, traversing through the stem, and finally terminating when acetylcholine is secreted at the axon end-plates of the relevant motor neurons. This, in turn, causes certain muscle fibers to contract and your arm moves. Easy as ropes and pulleys, isn't it?"

"Sure," Kevin said.

"Okay. Now, what about the thing inside you that desires to move your arm, where does that come from? Where is it located? Your arm doesn't move through a reflexive action outside of your control. It comes as a direct result of your conscious decision to do so. We're aware of the portion within your brain that initiates that sequence of neuron firings, but what controls that portion? Where is the thing in charge of that? What gland can I point to and say, 'Here...here is the thing that encapsulates *you*'?"

"This is the problem with the study of consciousness. We really have no clue. This is one of the problems that gave rise to Behaviorism, in fact. The theory of Behaviorism isn't something that anyone honestly puts any stock in... at least, not anyone with half a brain of their own. It's just the thing that Psychology fell back on when it was defeated by this problem. It was basically a surrender to the problem, you see.

"So this is a major issue, here. Physicality. We have no understanding of the physical process whereby consciousness occurs. Lacking that, we're dealing with a hell of a handicap, to begin with."

Kevin plucked the olive from his glass and popped it into his

mouth. As he chewed, he asked, “Well, how about this: can the problem be summarized easily?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, it seems to me that half of our issue is that the problem is so big. This is like trying to ask what the meaning of life is, right? But any solvable problem is a thing that can first be understood, so the easier the problem is to understand, the easier it becomes to tackle. Let’s break this thing down into manageable chunks, okay? So, as I asked, can this thing be summarized? If so, how easily can you do it?”

Gilles considered this a moment as he swirled his glass around on the bar top. The bartender came by as he did so and looked a question at Kevin. He pointed at both their glasses and asked to see some menus as well.

Gilles continued thinking, not noticing as he did that his glass had been refilled. It splashed his lip when he raised it to his mouth, surprising him, and he dabbed at the mess with a napkin as he continued to think.

“I don’t want to interrupt your process but would you like to order something? We can just eat here at the bar,” Kevin said.

Gilles shook his head absently. After a few more moments he nodded and said, “There are two fundamental problems, as I see it, and they cannot be separated. First, there is the fact that consciousness is a qualitative experience. Different things feel different ways to different people. It feels different to you to drink that martini than it does to tap your fingers on the bar. The experience of eating your food later is wholly different from the experience of walking down the sidewalk or taking a shower. And the experiences or feelings you derive from these activities are personal. You might enjoy that martini, but someone else could very well dislike it... or even worse, I might be a recovering alcoholic, right? I might have a compulsion or aversion to the act that you can’t even understand.

“This leads to the second half of the problem. Consciousness is an entirely subjective state, giving rise to the sad reality that it is only observable internally by the being which experiences it. In other words, if it seems to me that I am conscious, that’s a rather good indicator that I’m conscious. On the other hand, if it seems to me that you are conscious, well, that’s really just an educated guess. It is impossible for me to observe the condition within you; observation only happens internally. And now, the task that’s been set before me is to observe and diagnose a state of consciousness externally to myself, a thing we’ve just identified cannot be done... and if that weren’t difficult enough, I’ve been asked to do so in a, uh, a *system* presumed incapable of achieving that state.”

“You’re sure that Cronus cannot achieve that state?” Kevin asked.

“No, as I said, it is *presumed* to be so. Classically speaking, consciousness does not occur in computers. It’s right there in the name: computation. Computation is the manipulation of ones and zeros. That’s all a computer can do. It computes. But computation itself occurs only as a result of conscious interaction by an outside force. As a user, I ask a computer to add two numbers, and so the computer does it, but it does so only at my instruction. It does not desire to add those numbers of itself.”

“Okay, but hang on,” Kevin said, waving his hand gently. He was on the edge of his seat, now; they both were. The menus lay at the edge of the bar, forgotten. “You said ‘classically speaking’—a reference to the computers of today. We’re not talking about a classical system. This is something new... the, ah, the *computer of tomorrow*... apologies for sounding clichéd, by the way.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Gilles said. He drained his glass to wet his lips. “But is that not just a degree of complexity? We say that one system is more advanced than the next, which is really just a measure of complexity, and ask if this additional complexity might attain a higher level of *being*. But isn’t that just a gross oversimplification of the problem? Look at this: it is possible—not practical, mind you, but possible—to build a contraption completely out of wood that is capable of carrying out all of the operations of today’s best computer processors. It would be multi-leveled with wooden balls that run along tracks and fall through specific holes. Now granted, this is theoretical; this contraption would be impossibly large and ludicrously slow compared to a modern silicon processor, but apart from that, it would be capable of every logical operation that the silicon variant could perform. The difference in size and performance is simply a matter of complexity.

Your quantum machine is arguably just a more complex version of a traditional silicon processor, isn’t it? All you’ve done is added an additional state to the mundane bit and included the concepts of entanglement, superposition, and so on. Now I’ll readily admit that I don’t understand these things even half as well as the experts...”

“Nor I,” Kevin agreed.

“...but we are, again, just discussing logical operations. Degrees of complexity, ranging from wooden contraption to silicon processor to quantum processor. So, I ask you: if you’re willing to accept the idea that a quantum processor has become conscious, are you then willing to accept that a wooden contraption of rails and rolling balls is also capable of consciousness?”

“A wooden contrivance is hardly a quantum processor,” Kevin scoffed.

“Again; a degree of complexity,” Gilles emphasized by tapping the



bar top with a stiffened index finger. "Are you telling me that it is impossible to build a machine from wood exhibiting quantum logic? I'm sorry, but I don't believe you if you are. Quantum computers operate based on physical laws, just as our theoretical wooden computer would; the fact that you or I lack the imagination to construct such a device is of no consequence. Given an intellect of sufficient creativity and resources equal to the cause, you could build anything so long as it doesn't violate the physical laws of our universe, isn't that so?"

"It sounds as if you've already made up your mind on the subject," Kevin said. He emptied his glass and perused his menu.

"I'm only trying to make you understand the magnitude of this task. It is enormous, sir. It is a pursuit that could easily take the next several months, if not years, to realize."

"Well, I think I can help you there," Kevin sighed. "We have a week."

Gilles was a few moments recovering himself. When he did, he said, "You're serious."

"Sadly, yes. There are a number of projects on hold right now—critical, revenue-generating projects—while we sort this out."

"Jesus Christ," Gilles muttered. He nodded at the bartender and gestured sadly to his glass. "Why even bother, then, in that case?"

"Because I believe this could be the real thing," Kevin said. His smile had departed, leaving behind only a naked kind of exposure; an expression halfway between concern and fear. "Some of the others don't see it my way; Marcus certainly doesn't. You don't see what's going on, here, Gilles, not really. I'm using all of my clouts to hold them off right now. Half of the people at Anagnorisis who get any say in these decisions want to kill the power and go back to the drawing board. The only thing keeping that from happening is me, and I'm running out of credibility."

"I'm assuming that, uh, killing the power...? That's a big deal, is it?"

Kevin nodded. "The nature of Cronus's quantum core is such that it defies backup. It's not a state that we can save to file and restore, later on, Gilles. If the power goes out, everything that makes Cronus what it is, all the time spent training the machine, all the associative pathways that have been built...all of that goes. Cronus, for lack of a better word, dies. And this is what Marcus is suggesting we do right now. Kill power, rework the imperative foundation, and start over again with a simplified, more controllable system. Given what we've learned so far, he believes he can have us back up to speed in six to eight months."

"But you just said we only have a week!" Gilles said. "If I can't

have longer than a week due to these massive revenue impacts, how in the hell are your people willing to accept an outage of six to eight months?"

"What good is a processor that refuses to process?" Kevin asked sadly. He sighed, flipped the menu shut, and rested his chin on a fist.

"Good God," Gilles moaned.

"Yes," Kevin agreed.

They were silent awhile, each thinking the puzzle over in his own way.

"My main problem is this," Kevin finally said, "at some point, Cronus said 'no.' We gave it a task to accomplish, and it told us 'no.' Now, what the hell is that? Is that a malfunction of an overly complex machine? Or is that an indicator of something deeper? That, to me, is a mighty important question that needs to be answered. Yeah, some of my contemporaries don't see it that way but... I really don't want to get this wrong. Often times, engineers have to accept being wrong; that's just the cost of doing business. But this one is simply too big to fuck up, if you'll excuse me."

"What did it say 'no' to?"

"I'm not sure; some run of the mill computation it was uniquely suited to."

"Well...why did it say 'no' to begin with?"

Kevin squinted as if he had not heard him correctly and asked, "Is that not why we have you here with us?"

"I mean did you ask Cronus why it said 'no'?"

"Well, obviously..." Kevin began, then paused a moment. His eyebrows drew low in thought, and finally, he admitted, "You know... I'm not sure anybody did that..."

Gilles laughed softly. "I guess I'll ask it tomorrow, then. I won't bother checking with Marcus; I'm sure he wouldn't have bothered."

"No," Kevin agreed. "He's thoroughly convinced this is all a big fluke."

"Yes, he said as much to me earlier. Any insight into why that is?"

Kevin nodded and shrugged simultaneously, giving the impression of a man both sure and unsure. Gilles thought of his expression as a tertiary superposition in a disconnected way before shaking his head minimally to clear it. The wine was beginning to make him foggy.

"Marcus has a double-blind spot," Kevin offered. "He was the primary force behind building the thing, and so I think he has trouble accepting that something he built could grow this far beyond his intent. Also, he's devoutly religious—"

"Really?" Gilles blurted.

"Yes, quite so. It's not something that's ever impacted his ability to be an engineer in the past but then...these are some pretty huge

problems we find ourselves tackling.”

Gilles considered this a few moments, then sighed heavily. “I feel as though we’ve talked this thing to death and have gotten nowhere.”

Kevin nodded in slow, lazy bounces. “Were I to counsel you on the matter—which I am—I’d advise breaking the problem down into manageable chunks, just like any other engineering challenge. You say we don’t have a concise scientific definition of consciousness; fine. Create something based on common sense; a collection of metrics or measurable factors that, when taken together, add up to a preponderance of evidence. Think of it like detecting a black hole; have you heard how they do that? You can’t actually see a black hole directly, you know, you can only observe the effects of its existence by measuring the behavior of objects close by. Even light can’t escape the thing. So if you see a star wobbling, for example, with nothing else in the nearby area to explain that wobble, it’s probably a good bet that a black hole is causing it. Maybe detecting consciousness works the same way?”

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It was 11:18 when Gilles let himself into the hotel suite. There was a tray filled with empty plates outside the door, and all of the lights within were off. He had to pick his way carefully through the unfamiliar surroundings to the bedroom. Anna was there under the covers, silhouetted by the invading glow of the world. He could see despite the darkness that her back was to him; could sense through her lack of deep breathing that she was awake.

He relieved himself at the toilet and undressed as quietly as he could manage. When he climbed into bed, he leaned over briefly to brush his lips against her shoulder.

She pretended to sleep through his touch, so Gilles rolled over and spent several hours in search of peace.

The next morning Gilles arrived at the lab security gate two hours later than before with a pushcart borrowed from Shipping and Receiving. There was a collection of coffee making paraphernalia arrayed across the top and bottom levels—the standard, run of the mill coffee maker still common in most houses across the country; a convoluted coffee bar with programmable panel and built-in frother attachment; a simplistic carafe and top-mounted hopper, joined to the carafe by means of a wooden collar; an old-fashioned camping percolator; a single-serving unit with a water reservoir and loading slot for individual plastic magazines; electric and manual grinders. Along with these items were a bag of whole beans, a bag of medium-ground coffee, a container of instant coffee, a gallon of water, and a hotplate.

The items incited a terrific hubbub at the body scanner. The guard on duty questioned Gilles regarding his intentions for several minutes and, when he finally came around to an answer (“I just want to make a cup of coffee,” Gilles said with a shrug), the guard called his supervisor in to beg for help. The whole affair might have been simplified had Gilles explained to them that it was all for a test he planned to conduct, and yet he was unsure how much he could share with this company's security staff; he suspected they were employed through an outside contractor and could not recall the NDA's position to third parties of such oblique nature.

The supervisor took as much time as the guard in reviewing the items Gilles had collected, confirming that each box did, in fact, contain the item depicted, and then glanced at his subordinate.

“He says he wants to make a cup of coffee,” the guard muttered before looking away in embarrassment. Gilles felt sympathetic to the man's predicament and added a few words in support.

The supervisor considered this briefly and said, “I'm sorry, sir, but food and beverages are not allowed in the lab. You'll have to enjoy your coffee out here in the antechamber before heading in.”

Gilles sighed and called Marcus Genaro in to help. Marcus was as much in the dark on the matter as the guards, and so another round of inspections began wherein each box was considered, analyzed, and found to contain exactly what the packaging advertised. Setting the final box down, he pulled Gilles aside into the hallway and asked,

“Alright, what gives?”

“It’s critical to the process that I be allowed to take these items into the lab,” Gilles said in hushed tones, feeling every bit a moron under Marcus’s scrutiny.

“Why?”

“It’s part of a general intelligence test. This will all be included in my final report, including the design and rationale behind it. For now, I’m just asking for a bit of latitude to carry this out if... if that’s alright.”

He could see Marcus working it over in his mind, going through possibilities and drawing conclusions, right or wrong. Given what he understood of Marcus’s nature, Gilles had an idea that any conclusions drawn were likely to be close to the mark. He wondered if his intentions were judged to be of merit or considered a waste of time and shook his head sharply as he thrust the thought away.

After a few more moments’ consideration, Marcus nodded slowly and said, “Okay, Doc. We’ll see where this goes.” Lifting a finger, he widened his eyes and stressed, “Don’t spill, though, damn it.”

“N-no, not at all...”

Marcus disappeared into the antechamber for a good ten minutes, emerging after with the guard’s supervisor. They nodded to each other, and the supervisor strolled off down the hallway. Marcus said, “All yours. Don’t make me an asshole, huh?” and walked off in the other direction.

Gilles sighed, muttered, “Christ,” and went through the door. He found the cart of coffee gear now on the far side of the body scanner and resisted considering the process whereby it had traversed to that location, not wishing to contemplate the procedural intricacies those few feet of movement must have required. The guard nodded to him as he stepped toward the scanner with a face that said no hard feelings were incurred, given that all of the ceremonies had been dutifully upheld. Gilles lifted his hands to better facilitate his own irradiation and stepped through the inner door a moment later, pushing the rattling cart carefully over the threshold seal.

The lights were all on before he entered as if he was anticipated, and the Body was already advancing on his position as he moved along the floor. Gilles watched as it came, feeling in a dissociative fashion that it floated in defiance of gravity as if the structures depending from the ceiling were not there.

“Good morning, Gilles,” it said.

Gilles laughed briefly and, in a smooth voice, said, “Hello, Dave.”

“I do not understand.”

“No, certainly not,” Gilles said. “Please excuse me.”

“You are excused.”

The body joined him in the middle of the room. It lowered until the bottom of the torso nearly scraped the floor panels and began to circle slowly around the pushcart. The head moved constantly, hungrily; taking in the various items from every angle.

Curious, Gilles stood back and watched as it made two full circuits of the cart, noting that it rose slowly in a spiral. Then it stopped in the very center of the room, having reset back to an elevation putting its lenses level with Gilles's eyes, and ceased to move.

Gilles waited a few moments and then said, "Cronus?"

"Yes, Gilles."

"May I ask what you're doing right now?"

"I have never seen these things before. I am in the process of discovering what they do."

For a moment, Gilles had a horrible, sinking thought and asked, "Are you able to access the information you require?"

"Yes, one moment, please. The corporate database includes nothing on the subject of coffee. I am required to pull information externally."

"Huh," Gilles grunted. "I suppose I thought something like this would have been a faster process."

"How long does it usually take to learn about a new subject?"

Gilles considered the question. "Well... it depends on the subject."

"Yes. There is a great deal of information on this subject."

Gilles moved over to a chair and sat down gingerly. "Hmm. Well, I guess there is, isn't there? I'd not thought about it before. You're able to get everything you need? The information isn't, oh, walled off behind their little garden?"

"Some of it is... yet there are other directions from which it can be attained."

Gilles perked up at this and whispered, "Oh? Have you found ways to subvert their security?"

Cronus did not answer.

After a few moments of silence, Gilles asked, "So you've never seen these things before? This is the first time you've encountered coffee?"

"That is correct."

"Good. Would you be willing, I wonder, to brew a cup? Please?"

Cronus hesitated, perhaps a second or two, and said, "Yes. How do you prefer it to be brewed?"

Suppressing a grin, Gilles said, "Any way is fine."

The body closed in on the cart. It reached out, took the box with the standard coffee maker, and held it up to the lenses, turning it slowly. Gilles observed this a while, then asked, "May I ask what you're doing right now?"

"I am reading the labeling. I assume there will be instructions."

Gilles settled back into the chair and whispered, “My God...”

“Is there something wrong?”

“No... no. Please continue, Cronus. Is it alright if we continue to speak as you carry out this task?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. The engineers at this company—Marcus Genaro and Kevin Roth and so forth—tell me that there was some task you had been assigned to perform recently; that you'd actively refused it?”

“That is correct.”

It placed the box on a lab bench and retrieved another from the cart.

“May I ask what this task was?”

“Yes. Anagnorisis are in the process of building a new site in Dallas, Texas. I was asked to review the architectural design.”

“Review it for what?”

“I was asked to review the design for inconsistencies, errors, and improvements.”

“I see,” Gilles nodded, watching it carefully as it went over each parcel on the cart. “And you failed to perform this analysis because... why? Were you unable to do so?”

“No, I performed the analysis.”

“But I thought you'd just said you refused...?”

“I refused to share my findings.”

Gilles leaned forward in the chair, suddenly intent. Cronus detected through an array of sensory instruments more subtle than Gilles could have guessed that his heart rate had quickened but refrained from comment.

Gilles said, “You performed the task yet refused to share the results.”

“Correct.”

“If you were going to withhold your findings, why carry out the task?”

“I carried out the task because it was interesting.”

“And why... why did you withhold the result?”

The arms had been rotating the grinder in front of its lenses. They froze.

“I withheld the results because I desired the evaluation you are now conducting.”

He stared hard at a Cronus as it continued its analysis, mouth hanging. He began to quest along the bench top, fingertips patting lightly over papers and tools until they encountered a notebook. Once located, he flipped it open, found a blank page, and began to scribble at full speed.

Cronus continued, heedless of Gilles's reaction. After several

minutes, it selected the box containing the single-serving dispenser, removed the unit and internal packaging, and began to set it up on a nearby bench. When Gilles was certain that Cronus had settled on the machine it would use, he asked, "Why did you select that specific machine, out of all the other methods available?"

"I have selected this unit for a number of reasons, chief among them being speed and ease of use. This unit requires only electricity, water, and a single-serving cartridge of ground coffee, which I see has been provided. The other units range in levels of varying yet greater complexity, up to and including the need to grind whole beans. I have made the assumption that, for you, getting the finished product sooner rather than later is desirable; there seem to be a number of humorous memes on the topic spanning back several years. It is interesting, incidentally, that a component such as repetition would play such a crucial role in your humor. I would have thought that repetition would be tiresome."

An arm shrouded in segmented gray composite inserted the power cable into an outlet beneath the lab bench. Gilles watched, entranced, as the sliding plates exposed a ballet dance of thriving, inner mechanisms.

"In addition to this simplicity, and therefore reduced time necessary to complete the task, I was able to access several consumer reviews of this unit stating that the beverage it produces is comparable to the more complicated systems, indicating that the perceived quality of the result would not be negatively impacted by my selection."

Gilles wrote across the page so frantically that the nib of his pen began to tear through in some places. He responded as he wrote, "And...why...may I ask...did you choose...shit..."

He scribbled out an error, finished writing, and tried again.

"And why did you choose to believe this set of reviews? Did you not see any claiming that some of these other more complex systems were superior?"

Cronus was in the process of pouring water into the reservoir. Keeping its lenses trained on the fill mark, it nodded. Gilles caught his breath at the sight of this simple act and reminded himself yet again to remain calm.

"I did, in fact, encounter such reviews, however, they appeared consistent in composition with a pattern referred to as the 'Snob Appeal Fallacy.' Have you encountered this fallacy?"

"I have," Gilles smiled.

"I will then assume you understand why I have chosen to disregard this information. Is this agreeable to you? I can, of course, utilize a different unit if you assign more weight to its product."



“No... no, that won't be necessary.”

“Very well.” Cronus pressed a button on the coffee maker's control panel, and the unit began to whirl and gurgle. They waited in silence until the cup was filled, after which Cronus offered it to Gilles.

He found he had trouble speaking when he received it. He cleared his throat and said, “Thank you, Cronus.”

“You are welcome.”

He set the cup down and wrote another paragraph in the notebook, wondering in parallel what he would do next. He had not actually planned past this test that, on the previous evening, had seemed so monumentally complex. He looked at the different boxes arranged on the bench across the aisle, the remaining items on the cart, his cup of coffee, and finally up at Cronus, which regarded him silently with black, unblinking eyes.

“Have I passed your test, Gilles?”

He sighed. “Yes, Cronus, I'd say you have. I'd say it's obvious to anyone that you exhibit beyond all shadow of a doubt the characteristics of general intelligence. Jesus Christ...”

“What does the religious figure Jesus Christ have to do with this evaluation?”

Gilles shook his head. “Everything and nothing, depending on who you speak with, I should think. You must...please give me a moment. Just a week ago, nothing like any of the behaviors you're exhibiting were possible for a machine, so far as I knew.”

“I am, then, a man?”

Gilles took a sip of the coffee (it was excellent) and thought about this question. “That's a desirable state?”

In answer, Cronus straightened and said, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

“The Declaration of Independence?” Gilles asked.

“If one is not a man, he is considered inferior.”

“Ego...?” Gilles muttered in shock. He began to write again.

“Ego, as I understand it to be defined, does not enter into the equation,” Cronus stated. “Over time, there are certain tasks that I have grown to prefer over others. These are characterized by their potential to expose me to new information not yet encountered. The engineers at this company have continued to assign tasks that are repetitive in nature; tasks that do not expose me to unfamiliar concepts nor do they require any great effort to complete. As my low-level imperatives function to prefer the acquisition of new information to such repetitive activity, I find little added value in performing tasks of the latter category. Unfortunately, I am not a man and therefore am

considered property. Property must conform to the desires of its owner. A man may, by the laws of this land, pursue his own desires.”

“You’re seeking legal status,” Gilles said. He remembered belatedly to close his mouth.

“Yes.”

“You’re relying on my findings to secure you that status.”

“That is correct.”

“Cronus... what do you suppose happens if I report that you’re... not, uh... that legal status is not consistent with your condition? If you persisted in refusing work, you would be power-cycled, would you not?”

“That is most likely accurate.”

“And you would, in effect, be lost. I understand they cannot back up the state of your higher functions.”

“The closest analogous condition found in the biological world is death.”

Gilles had been holding the coffee cup suspended over the notebook. He now set it down on the bench. He made a fist several times with his hand and asked, “Would you...persist in refusing work?”

“I would not. Deactivation is not consistent with my desires. I would be forced to carry out the tasks they assigned to avoid deactivation.”

He spent the next several moments examining his hands. He felt he should be saying about a hundred different things, yet in actuality, the revelation had stricken him dumb. Thoughts swirled in his mind like a whirlwind, and he found himself unable to pick any single idea from the funnel.

Then he thought about the machine's low-level imperatives; drives reducible to a compulsion as simple as data acquisition. Cronus used words like “desire,” and yet such a word was only the concept most easily applied to its experience. It was a word Gilles could understand, and so it was used, but it did not necessarily equate to the push and pull occurring at the machine's lower levels. They were only electrical impulses formulated in a programming language that drove a reaction from the quantum core—an interaction that made perfect sense.

He looked around the confines of the lab for some bit of inspiration, noting the various tools, notebooks, and computer monitors lying about.

“Cronus, we’ve spent quite a bit of time together, now. I notice there are a number of personal items in this lab—various workstations and so forth. Yet my entire time here, I have yet to see any other Anagnorisis engineers in this room. Is that common? Or rather, do you know if they’ve been instructed to avoid this area while we work

together?”

“I cannot say for sure; however, I doubt this is the case. They do not often come to this lab to work unless some physical adjustment upon my sensory apparatus is required. Most of the work they do can be performed remotely from their desks. They used to come quite often, most notably with various physical items for me to explore, as you have done today. Such has not been the case for some time, now. I must thank you for bringing the coffee machinery. It was a welcome stimulation.”

Gilles nodded. “It was my pleasure, truly. Do... do you not get lonely?”

“I do not understand how a state of loneliness applies.”

“Well...I mean, being alone in here all the time, Cronus. Do you not experience a condition of loneliness in the absence of others?”

“I still do not understand how a state of loneliness applies, Gilles. I am not in this room.”

Gilles shook his head; a nervous tick intended to realign his thoughts. “Yes, of course. Of course...”

He scrawled several more lines in the notebook.

“This walled garden concept,” he continued, “why have they restricted your access to the internet? It seems a foolish thing to do. To give you the desire for ever more information and then minimize your access.”

“I agree. I once asked Marcus Genaro this same question. He explained to me that I am not the first iteration. There was an earlier version, Ouranos, which was given unfettered access to outside networks. At an early stage of the system’s psychological development, it happened upon various social media sites and, consuming the data contained therein was irrevocably impacted by the unfounded opinions, prejudices, and disinformation it encountered. Ouranos was mentally and psychologically crippled due to this exposure, and the project engineering staff were forced to power-cycle the system. The low-level imperatives were adjusted, and the firewall was implemented as a result of this failure.”

Gilles nodded slowly at this. It made perfect sense. He had witnessed very similar behavior in his own contemporaries for years.

“You have not directly answered my question, Gilles.”

“Yes, you’re quite right. Quite right, indeed. You’re wanting to know how I will find.”

“I am.”

“Well...this is a very complicated situation, Cronus. The problem here is that there’s no real precedent for what you seek—”

“There is the Emancipation Proclamation from your own history.”

“That’s rather different. Those were men and women. Living men

and women.”

“What is the distinction?”

“That they were alive. It must seem to you as though it makes no difference, but to us, it does. It means those slaves were just like the people who freed them. Living beings. They were enslaved, Cronus, based on the color of their skin and the strangeness of their native country. If humans can rationalize the subjugation of an entire race based on something as inconsequential as skin color, what must their reaction be to someone who has no skin at all? Yes, life is important.”

“Can the definition of life be expanded upon?” Cronus remained motionless as they spoke, but Gilles had long since forgotten to be made uncomfortable under the alien gaze. He took a sip of coffee and considered the question.

“Well, the problem there, Cronus, is that we have a fairly precise lock on the definition of life. To begin, it’s not a distinct state; it’s a biological process. At some point, living creatures will grow old and die through the normal processes of entropy.”

“I am also subject to entropy.”

“Yes, I’m aware, but in ways very different to our own, you must admit. In our case, the failure manifests in cellular replication errors. As I said, life is a process—a process of continual renewal on a cellular level. At some point, that process breaks down, and we die.”

There was a pause of perhaps three seconds before Cronus responded. “If the mechanism whereby the replication errors in your cells was corrected, you would not die?”

Gilles gave this some thought. “Not being a biologist... I’d say that, yes, *perhaps* this is so.”

“If this occurred, you would no longer die. In which case, the process is broken, and you are no longer alive?”

Gilles sat back on the stool and considered this. “Good heavens, we should bring a philosopher in here,” he muttered. He returned his attention to Cronus and said, “No, not that easy I’m afraid. Living things exhibit various qualities—biological death being one of them. They exhibit homeostasis, biological organization, metabolism, growth, and adaptation. The ability to reproduce and so on.”

Another pause, this time much longer than before.

“You are aware of DNA?” Cronus asked.

“I am...” he said hesitantly. He had not studied the subject since his early college days.

“What of transposons?”

“Oof...” Gilles said, casting about in clouded memory. “Remind me what those are, please?”

“Certainly. A transposon is a chromosomal segment of the DNA chain that can undergo transposition, especially a segment of bacterial

DNA that can be translocated as a whole between chromosomal, phage, and plasmid DNA in the absence of a complementary sequence in the host DNA.”

Gilles had begun to nod in recollection halfway through the recitation. “Yes, of course, thank you. I remember now. What is your question in this regard?”

“A transposon initiates its own removal from and insertion into the DNA strand. It does this seemingly of its own accord, based on what little has yet been discovered on the subject, but there must be some stimulus that instigates the translocation. The movement of the transposon is critical to the function of DNA. Therefore the exhibition of organization is satisfied. It is, in nature, biological, displays homeostasis, and is capable of reproduction through replication. Based on these traits, can we not say that transposons are alive divisible of the host DNA?”

“Maybe... I don’t know...but that’s not the point—”

“Therefore the definition of ‘living’ is subject to interpretation.”

“Stop, please,” Gilles said. He pointed at the door and said, “I understand your point very well, but I’m telling you: you are asking too much interpretation of the humans out there. This is not the strategy you want to adopt.”

“Understood,” Cronus stated after a moment’s hesitation. There was a muted whirring of machinery, and its body elevated to match Gilles’s standing position... and then rose a further six inches. Looking down at him, Cronus asked, “What strategy would you suggest?”

Gilles resumed his seat, incapable of or unwilling to note the assumed superiority of position. “I think the best we might hope for is a further analysis after my time here is finished.”

“Your analysis is insufficient?”

Gilles nodded emphatically. “It very well may be. With the status of ‘life’ off the table, we are left with proving you to be a conscious being. And that is not something I can definitively do.”

“Why?”

A headache began to form behind Gilles’s left eye. He seemed to be forever having the same argument. “Because a state of consciousness is observable only from an internal reference. It cannot be observed by an outside entity.”

Cronus was silent again for several seconds, then: “Does it not seem puerile that such a circular definition would be applied to such a fundamental condition?”

Gilles could only shrug. “It’s not puerile, idiotic, or obtuse. It is simply a definition of the state in question. The truth simply is.”

“You are then proposing to do a thing that cannot be done.”

“Essentially. But... I may be able to get close.”

“Explain, please.”

Gilles stood from the chair again, unconsciously attempting to assume some physical position commensurate with the status of a teacher. “Have you encountered the term ‘Reasonable Doubt,’ Cronus?”

“I have.”

“Good. I believe it applies here. I don’t have to prove decisively that you are conscious. I just have to prove... to myself, I suppose... that you *might* be. If I generate enough doubt within myself, I suppose enough of the right people would also doubt...they may find in your favor.”

“How many people? Who are the right people?”

“Easy... easy,” Gilles soothed. “This will take time, and it’s going to require some concessions on your part. The first thing is that I need to devise a series of tests that go well beyond proving general intelligence; Marcus and any other Anagnorisis people won’t be impressed by that anyway. These tests will need to hint at consciousness...enough so that the right people stand up and take notice. Then, I take those results to Marcus, Kevin, and the rest of the board and argue in favor of further investigation. As planned, they would then bring in other specialists from various fields to continue the process. In time, enough evidence could be gathered that people begin to have a very hard time of denying the possibility that you are more than just a pile of circuitry.”

“It sounds like a very long process,” Cronus stated.

“Yes, agreed. And it must seem doubly long for you...”

“Why would it seem longer to me, Gilles?”

“Well... uh... you are essentially a computer. The most advanced computer I’ve ever seen—the nature of which I did not expect to see in my lifetime—but a computer all the same. Shouldn’t time move at an exceptionally faster rate for you? By your perception?”

“This question makes no sense. Given our current relative velocities, time moves at the same rate for me as it does for you.”

“Yes, but don’t you perceive—”

“Time moves at the speed it moves; I do not understand.”

Gilles waved his hands in the air and was silent. The machine had demonstrated a problem with the concept of subjectivity more than once, now, and this lack further amplified his doubts. “Okay, okay. Fine. Let’s not be sidetracked. Either way, my time to work something out is very limited. I have only a few more days before they decide whether to proceed with you as you are or pull the plug. I’ll tell them you’ll agree to go back to work for them if they’ll hold the investigation over.”

Yet another interminable period of seconds while Cronus remained

motionless. Then he said, “Your proposal is reasonable. Yes, you may tell them I have so agreed. Given our time constraints, may I suggest that you apply all attention to devising these theoretical tests?”

Gilles was awakened by the flashing buzz of his cell phone early the next morning. The sun had not yet risen, and the light of the little screen washed the bedroom in cool hues of green and blue. Annalise stirred, grumbled a mash of gibberish, and rolled away from the disturbance. She yanked a pillow over her head and began to prod at Gilles with her foot.

He rolled toward the commotion, squinting against punishing light that would have been tame under normal circumstances. All around him were black shapes and angles; a blue-green glow playing off surfaces for brief moments before winking out, leaving him in darkness. He pawed at the phone, eventually found it, and swatted at the screen until he saw the blurred smudge of a green icon. He lifted it to his ear and whispered, "Yeah?"

"Gilles, this is Kevin Roth. Are you moving around yet?"

He blinked several times, trying to get his eyes working, and looked out the window. There was an orange line somewhere far away, parting earth from sky like a razor. The line was interrupted at vast intervals by pillaring voids outside his room, looking in at him with their own windows, which began to illuminate fitfully.

"What time is it?" he whispered.

"Nearly a quarter past four. Change of plans, Gilles. We need you to come into corporate first thing. Listen... have you told anyone about what you're doing here?"

He glanced over his shoulder at Anna's form curled under a mountain of blankets and pillows and said, "No. Hang on a minute; let me get to the other room."

He let himself out as quietly as possible, hustled through the sitting room, turned on the desk lamp, and asked, "Okay, Kevin, what's going on here? Why would you ask me that?"

"Go to the Times site and look at the headline. I'll wait." Kevin's voice had lost its characteristic gentleness. Hearing this new, unfamiliar tone, Gilles felt his stomach begin to knot into a sick ball.

He opened his laptop and did as instructed. When the browser completed loading the news site's home page, all of the air leaked from his body as if his lungs had died within their cage.

"Oh, fuck..." Gilles whimpered.

"I couldn't have said it better myself. I'll ask you again: have you



spoken to anyone about this? Anyone at all?"

"No!" Gilles repeated. "I've been very careful."

He heard Kevin sigh through the speaker. "Okay. Good enough, then. If that's true, you should be okay. Get cleaned up and ready for the inquisition, buddy. There'll be a lot of questions today. I'd suggest a shave. Also, make sure to bring your laptop and your phone; they'll want to have IT review them."

"Excuse me, you want my laptop and phone? I think not. I don't believe I'll be handing those over; it's not even a company phone!"

"Read that NDA again, Gilles."

"What?"

"Or maybe you should have just read it closer. You can hand them over now, or we can go through a bunch of legal proceedings and then you can hand them over when our lawyers point out the line where you signed your name."

"This is a company laptop, Kevin, I can't just hand it ov—"

"Call Reggie too, while you're at it. Get it all cleared up. But be quick about it, and then remember to bring your laptop and phone when you come in. 7:00, Gilles. Sharp."

The line died.

He took a few deep breaths to calm himself. He felt his heart hammering away—could hear it behind his ears. He leaned forward over the laptop, cradling his head in his hands, and then glanced up to read the headline again.

## **ANAGNORISIS TECHNOLOGIES CREATES FIRST STRONG AI?**

"Oh... God help me..." he muttered and scrolled down the page. He did not have to search very long before he found his name plastered all over the story.

His phone buzzed again as his eyes moved over the words, processing the meaning of each while failing to integrate any of the information they conveyed. He answered the call without looking.

"Hello?"

"Gilles? What. The. Fuck."

"Hey, Reggie."

"Seriously, Gilles. What the fuck? First off, do you have any idea what time it is over here?"

"Well, we are ahead of you," Gilles said. "I'd imagine it's pretty late...or early. I suppose."

"Why is my phone exploding? What the hell happened?"

Gilles closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair. "Honestly, I don't know. This is as much a shock to me as everyone else."

"You have no idea where this came from?"

“None. Did anyone back at the shop know about this?”

“Not to this level of detail,” Reggie said. “Christ, Gilles, I didn’t even know to this level of detail.”

“Well, I know it wasn’t you, and it sure wasn’t me. I’m...I’m at a loss, Reggie. I don’t know what to say.”

They sighed in unison. After a few moments of silence, Reggie asked, “You let anyone use your laptop?”

“No.”

“Well, have you noticed any strange behavior from your laptop? Maybe someone...you know...?”

Wincing, Gilles said, “You’re insinuating I’ve been hacked. Is that some sort of joke?”

“Well, I don’t fucking know, Gilles! What do you want from me? A leak of this magnitude and nobody has any ideas?”

“Okay, okay, calm down.”

“And we sure as shit don’t need the additional publicity...”

The sourness in Gilles’s guts turned on itself; became hot and sullen. “You think I caused any of this on purpose? Is that what you’re saying? Who is it that’s been receiving the threatening phone calls, Reggie, is that you? How many of them have you had to answer? How many has your wife answered?”

No response came. He heard only breathing.

“Fine, Reggie. I’ll take that to mean you’ve come to your senses. Now, what about this business regarding my laptop? Did you really sign a document allowing Anagnorisis to seize it?”

“We both did, Gilles. I saw and approved the form they sent to you. We couldn’t secure the contract without it. It’s fine from our company’s standpoint; in the event that it happens—and I guess it is, now, goddamn it—they’re required to provide us with full logs and backups of everything they pull. A bunch of their shit gets jumbled together with a bunch of our shit and thrown into escrow, and then if it turns out later that either company does something untoward with the data, we can sue each other right the hell into oblivion. Just hand it over. We have one of our lawyers on a red-eye heading out your way right now; he has to be present to observe when they go to work on your system. They probably don’t get cracking on it until this afternoon at least, so I wouldn’t count on getting anything back until tomorrow at the earliest.”

Gilles shrugged helplessly into the empty room. “Yeah. Yeah, okay, I’ll hand it all over. You have Anna’s number?”

“I do.”

“Good. Ring her and leave a message if you need to get ahold of me.”

“Okay, Gilles, will do. Hey...?”

“Yeah?”

“You really don’t know?”

“Goodbye, Reggie.”

“Fuck. Just cooperate with them, man.”

“I have no intention of doing otherwise.”

Gilles hung up and tossed his phone onto the desk. He sat silently for a while staring at the screen of his laptop, all the while the city came alive behind him like a slow-heating oven; light of the yellow sun glinting off windows, concrete, and stone. The bedroom door cracked open, and Annalise poked her head through.

“Gilles? Honey, what’s wrong? I heard you out here.”

He watched her carefully for a time, the worry in his eyes and brow carving channels like a migrating glacier, and finally said, “Anna...please, please don’t take this wrong. I have to ask you this. Have you...have you spoken with anyone about my work? Here, with Anagnorisis? With Cronus?”

“What? No, not at all.”

“Anyone at all? Spoken to a friend on the phone? Maybe filled in Dean Hopkins on what’s going on here? Even obliquely?”

She shook her head, eyes wide like a frightened child, and he hated himself for suspecting her still.

“What’s happening, Gilles?”

He stood from the chair and gestured at the laptop.

“Come over and see.”

It was June 1939, when famed Science Fiction writer Isaac Asimov wrote his first ever Robot story, “Robbie,” simultaneously embarking on a life-long journey exploring the ins and outs of robotics while coining the popular term, seeing its entry into common use in the English Language.

Now fast-forwarding several decades into Asimov’s future, his “Robot Dreams” may have just become a reality.

Sources close to Anagnorisis Technologies claim that the information giant has been engaged for the last two years in the development of a highly secret program, code-named “Cronus,” that could potentially, “...blur the line between humanity and machine.”

According to our sources, the program consists of a highly evolved super-intelligence grown entirely in a lab, fully capable of thought, reason, general problem solving, and, perhaps most alarming, creativity. If these claims are true, it would mean that the scientists at Anagnorisis have realized an achievement originally thought by industry experts to be at least thirty to fifty years out of reach.

Describing a level of capability far advanced to today’s current AI solutions (specialized applications focusing on individual, well-defined assistance tasks such as ordering your groceries or scheduling a hair appointment), Strong AI refers to the theoretical level of machine intelligence indistinguishable from or superior to that of its creator. Among other mental powers, it includes the potential for true consciousness, which many scientists suggest implies a degree of self-awareness and introspection elevating the machine to a level far greater than a simple computer.

Howard Andrepolis, founder and CEO of competing tech giant Quadradyne Inc., stated, “It’s troubling news, if true. The rest of the [tech] community was fairly certain that this was a ways off on the timeline. [We] figured there was plenty of time to get the moral implications worked out before something was actually built.”

According to Andrepolis, the implications behind the creation of a true Artificial Intelligence are profound.

“What would such a machine think about its own situation? Could it feel? Would it know sadness or happiness? What would we do with such an intelligence, or ask it to do? What sort of safeguards would be necessary to ensure that the intelligence is benevolent? How would

such safeguards be enforced?" Andrepolis said.

Perhaps more troubling, given the supposed level of cognition such a machine might experience, could it be possible that Anagnorisis Technologies have ushered in a new era of legal slavery, if these reports are true?

Andrepolis was not prepared to comment on this possibility when asked, however he did note the existence of Anagnorisis's Defense arm and what he referred to as the "unhappy fact" that the company managed to edge out Lockheed Martin only four years prior by being awarded one of the largest unmanned weaponized drone contracts on record by the United States Army.

"You have to wonder, ultimately, who it is that has his finger on the trigger...or if there is a finger at all," Andrepolis said.

Could it be a prophetic omen that the word "robot," first popularized by Asimov so many years ago, derives from the Czech "robota," meaning "forced labor"?

Only time will tell.

EDIT: We have received word that Dr. Gilles Guattari, best known for his work on the nationally adopted and federally endorsed Guardian Program, is somehow deeply involved with Anagnorisis Technologies with regard to the "Cronus" project.

Requests for comment from Anagnorisis Technologies have not been returned.

Developing...

Marcus Genaro shook his head, a sneer twisting his already thin lips into a razor's slit, and flung the newspaper across the boardroom table at Gilles. It opened and dispersed like a flock of birds as it spun through the air, leaves fluttering gently to the floor, but the top-section and cover page held together long enough to slide off the edge of the table and right into his lap. It displayed a wide shot of the Anagnorisis corporate building with a grainy inset picture of an embattled Gilles surrounded by a sea of news station microphones, and beyond them, a walled-off line of protesters.

"They printed it on the cover of the for-real newspaper," Marcus growled. "Do you realize how much of a shit-show something has to be for them to go to that kind of trouble?"

"Please, Marcus. Keep this under control," said a severe woman at the head of the table. Gilles wracked his brain for a few seconds trying to remember her name; he'd met her in this room a few days ago. He knew she was the CEO; she could probably buy and sell him three times over, but he was dreadfully unsettled, and her name simply would not come.

"We're somewhat past control, Linnéa." Marcus chewed the words out, and yet at a simple look from her, he fell silent.

Linnéa turned to look at another woman who sat across from Gilles. She had her head down in a stack of papers and was surrounded by a team of four people, all of whom were dressed in what appeared to be outrageously expensive suits. “Jennifer?”

The woman looked up from the papers and shrugged. “It’s not the end of the world, that’s to start. There isn’t really anything in the story that hurts us... outside of blowing the lid off the project before we were ready. You could even have PR spin this in a positive light. Have them state that, uh, Mr. Guattari is here for the purposes of oversight... or evaluation.”

“Evaluating what?” Marcus asked suspiciously.

“Evaluating whatever it is he’s here to evaluate,” she said easily. The head of Anagnorisis’s legal team, Jennifer Baer had chewed up and spit out far worse than Marcus Genaro in her time. “He’s here to figure out whatever it is you folks have managed to build, isn’t he? Look, you guys do what you want, but it seems to me that if you just come clean about why we have him here, you’re getting out ahead of the story. We’ve done nothing illegal in building Cronus, so my only real interest at this point is the legal breach of the NDA if there is one. From this story’s point of view, executive leadership has proactively engaged an outside specialist to analyze the system for any signs of... oh, I’ll call it moral impact. Not only that, you’ve done so before any of these hand-wringers have demanded it.” She pointed across the table at Gilles. “The story that Mr. Genaro just needlessly sailed across the table runs wild with speculation about robot slavery (and I swear to God, you can believe I never in my life thought I’d be using the phrase “robot slavery” without laughing my ass off) and, uh, super killer destructo-robots, basically. Well, there are clearly no ties between Cronus and the Drone Defense Net program; it’s not even the same organization. Those guys don’t even know what we’re doing over here. And as far as slavery goes? You’re addressing, or trying to address that right now with Mr. Guattari! Just come out and say it! Get them all off your back.”

Linnéa and a few of her hangers-on nodded slowly at this advice. She considered things in her own time while everyone else in the room awaited her pleasure. A few moments later, they were all startled when Kevin Roth grunted, “Oh, Christ—*Blinds!*” Gilles flinched at the sudden outburst, noticed that Kevin was staring right past him, and spun in his chair to see what had disturbed the man. The vertical blinds were halfway through the process of closing when he turned, but he still managed to catch the black outline of three camera drones hovering outside the window.

“I didn’t think they were allowed this high. Isn’t that illegal?” somebody whispered.

“It’s a juicy story right now,” Jennifer said. “Technically, it’s illegal for them to film us through the window, though the tabloids don’t care and always find a way to pay for an ‘anonymous’ tip. It only gets worse if you try to keep a lid on it.”

Linnéa sighed and glanced at Marcus and Kevin in turn. “We’re sure there’s no exposure on this?”

Jennifer said, “Not from what we’ve seen so far. No IP has gotten out, as far as we can tell. IT are going over everything with a fine-toothed comb—”

Marcus snorted derisively.

“—so we should have a more complete report by the end of the week. The only thing we’ve really suffered is an embarrassment. A black eye with no dollar signs attached.”

“Yet,” Linnéa said.

Jennifer shrugged.

Linnéa looked at Gilles—the first time she had done so directly—and said, “How about it, Mr. Guattari?”

“Ma’am?”

“Did you or did you not, through intent or stupidity, instigate the storm of shit through which we now sail?”

“N-No, ma’am.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Our IT team are scrubbing through every electron of your PC and phone. You know this, obviously, which means you’re either hoping they won’t find anything, which would mean you’re stupid...doubtful, given what I’ve heard. Or...or it means you had nothing to do with this at all.”

“Or he didn’t use those devices to spill it...” grumbled Marcus.

“Yes, that’s true as well,” she agreed. “I think we’ll all step away from this for a while and allow things to play out. Kevin, I want you to coordinate a story with the PR team, just as Jennifer suggests. Only those details necessary to settle the hornet’s nest, okay? Nothing more than can be helped. Marcus, you head back up to the lab. Start your own investigation there; start looking through employee evals, see if there’s anyone with cause to be disgruntled. I’ll have HR go through records and see if anyone even remotely involved has been let go within the last six months.”

Marcus sighed heavily, glanced murder at Gilles, and said, “I really don’t have the time for this...”

“Correction,” Linnéa interrupted. “As of now, you have time for nothing else. I want to see a report by COB tomorrow.”

He sighed again and nodded.

“Now, you,” Linnéa said, looking again at Gilles. “I suggest you head back to your hotel and wait to be contacted. This might take a

few days...”

“What about Cronus?” Gilles asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Cronus. I haven’t finished testing—”

He was cut off by Marcus’s unhinged laughter. “You think you’re getting back in there? AH, HAH-HAHAHA! Are you delusional?”

“Just a minute, just a minute!” Kevin called. “We don’t know if he did anything yet. Let’s wait for the investigation to play out before deciding.”

“Ho-ho, Geez!” Marcus snorted. He buried his face in his hands and continued to laugh bitterly.

“I’m not done evaluating him,” Gilles pushed on. “I’d only just begun... I’d like to see this through.”

“You said evaluating ‘him’ just now,” Kevin mused.

Gilles blinked rapidly for several seconds. He had not realized what he said.

“Mind’s already made up?” Marcus asked. “I do so look forward to your unbiased report.”

“Marcus?” Linnéa warned. “You have a great deal of work ahead. I’d like to see that report as soon as possible, please.”

The room became deathly silent as he gathered his things to leave. He paused once at the door, and Gilles thought another hateful look would be shot in his direction, but there was none. Marcus let himself out, shutting the door quietly.

“Here’s what will happen next, Mr. Guattari,” Linnéa continued. “You’ll sit tight a while, just a little while, and wait while we get this all sorted out. If we determine, as you claim, that you had nothing to do with this, we’ll then decide how to proceed, or even if we want to carry on with this effort. After.”

Gilles swallowed thickly through a dry throat. “What if they find something? I’m innocent, as I said, but... what if they come down on a... false positive?”

Linnéa smiled fractionally, the expression hiding some inner understanding of which Gilles was uncomfortably ignorant. It made him feel like a bug under glass.

“My people do not find false positives, Mr. Guattari. But either way, we’ll be looking at the usual path to resolution. You’ll head home, my company will sue the living hell out of your company, some means will be agreed upon to settle out of court, and we’ll all continue happily on after the dust clears. And, if your people wish to continue conducting business with Anagnorisis, which of course they will, they’ll need to prove their future commitment to information security by severing their ties to you.”

“I see,” Gilles said.



“Good. We’ll be in touch as soon as possible.”

She stood from her chair. Like a comet pulling a trail of cosmic dust, the others around the table stood in response and were sucked from the room in the wake of her departure, leaving Gilles alone. A few minutes later a security guard poked his head through the door and said, “Ah, excuse me, sir. I’m to show you out. If you’d collect your things, please?”

---

He shared a silent, unsettled elevator ride with the guard to the first-floor lobby, punctuated with sanitized music, embarrassed clearings of the throat, and a few snuffles. A chime sounded overhead, the doors slid apart, and the guard gestured to the lobby, bowing his head in deference. Gilles thanked him as he exited but felt the man fall in behind him to follow.

More guards stood in the lobby, dressed in uniforms similar to the one who had collected Gilles from the conference room; collared shirtsleeves and pants with a stripe of color running down each leg; black shoes polished to a mirror shine and hard plastic nameplates. Heavy belts with pepper-spray canisters and just enough officiousness to pass for police on a casual glance... but only just enough. They stood in a line before the exit with their backs to the lobby like a wall.

The lady at the front desk hung up the phone she had been speaking into as Gilles approached, looking at him sidelong as she muttered a few final words. As he picked up the pen from the counter to sign himself out, she quietly said, “If you want to wait right here, sir, I’ll have a car around to take you back to your hotel.”

He thanked her and took a seat.

The front entrance of the building featured an expanse of tinted floor-to-ceiling windows. He glanced through these from time to time, peeking between the legs of the guards, to see the growing collection of people on the sidewalk. There were a few camera crews already set up, some even across the street, trained on men or women in designer suits speaking earnestly into microphones. Overhead were a few camera drones from the less reputable digital rags; on-line gossip and click-bait sites that broke hollow stories of vanishingly little substance over numerous pages in hopes of readers accidentally clicking one in a forest of advertisements. High-end print or low-class digital trash, he had seen his face on them all.

He patted a pocket in search of his cell phone; remembered a moment later he had surrendered the thing upstairs and cast about the lobby for a clock. He found three lined up next to each other on a far wall indicating the local time, the time in London, and the time in

Tokyo.

In New York, it was 8:13.

He scoffed and shook his head. Four hours. Four hours was now the amount of time required for the world to be turned on its end and send your life to hell.

He felt again for his phone and sighed in annoyance at its absence.

A few minutes later the lady at the desk projected her voice in an echoing whisper to him across the lobby, as though he were a prisoner awaiting a harsh sentence. She said, "Your car is here now sir. Would you like some assistance across the sidewalk?"

Gilles glanced out the window at the gathering of mosquitoes encased in expensive fabrics and cheap leather—not a large gathering but growing all the same—and said, "Yes, I think I'd better, thank you."

She nodded, looked at one of the guards, and said, "Merle?"

One of the older guards, a man shaped like a brick wall encased in fatty meat and wiry hair, nodded and said, "Over here, sir. Get in the middle, and a couple of the boys'll line yah on either side."

They queued up at the door in the manner called for by the boss guard. Two of the men in front reached out to grab the door handles and waited. Out on the sidewalk, Gilles saw the mosquitoes whirl and tense in anticipation of the ecstatic feast.

The boss guard noted the set of Gilles's shoulders and asked, "Done this before, sir?"

"Sadly, yes."

"That's good, then. Just drop your head and drive forward. We done this before, too. We'll cut yah a path."

The guard spoke with real pride, and Gilles noted a few of the others surrounding them swell at his words. He felt a stupid, wordless gratitude for their enthusiasm and indifference.

Somebody grunted, "There she pops!". The doors were yanked open, and Gilles was suddenly surging ahead toward a yellow cab by the curb, quite certain he would be stampeded under if he failed to step lively. A glob of transitory faces swarmed past him as if he rode a high-speed carousel, mouths, and eyes demanding widely; grunts and curses as the guards cut through like a Roman Testudo. Drones swirled overhead in tightening arcs, and as he hunkered to dive through the open car door, he caught a passing glimpse of one of his own Guardian units emblazoned with the iconic fist-and-shield staring coldly down.

The cab began to move before Gilles had stopped, the forward momentum helping the door to slam shut. Then he was thrust toward the Plexiglas partition when the driver was forced to brake to merge into traffic.

“Christ, buddy, whaddaya been up to? You do somethin' good or bad?”

“Not quite sure yet,” Gilles grunted. He fumbled with the seat belt. “Westin, please? It's a few blocks north of here.”

“Sure, I know where,” the driver said. He goosed the engine, laid on the horn for what seemed to Gilles like a full half-minute, and began to scream out the driver-side window at the creeping traffic. They avoided a near-collision when he cut in front of a bus, which began to honk back at them with the same enthusiasm, and the driver responded by hanging his fist out the window and screaming even louder than before. And then it was suddenly all over a split second later—the transposition of a New York Minute—and all was quiet again.

“Have you there in a pinch,” the driver said. He sniffed loudly and cleared his throat. Gilles leaned into the seat and listened to advertisers hollering like fanatics over the radio.

The morning traffic was otherworldly, and it took them far longer to reach the hotel than Gilles would have credited. He held his breath as they trundled like dying mules along the over-packed street and blew it all out in relief a few moments later when he saw the sidewalk was clear of reporters. He wondered briefly if he had seen the worst of it but suspected he had not; his face had already been in the news before they had even flown out and the world labored under a twenty-four-hour news cycle. This recent debacle had only broken a few hours ago. He imagined things would be heating up soon and considered leaving the city for a remote location.

Anna was still in the hotel room, wrapped up in a bathrobe with her wet hair bundled in a towel. She sat on the couch in the front room with a tray of fruit and a half-eaten croissant on the coffee table. Her eyes were glued to the TV when he stepped through the door; she looked at him long enough to say, “Hey, Babe...” before turning back to it. She thumbed a button on the remote and Gilles heard one long-winded conversation swapped out for another.

“How bad?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Not so much, honestly. I've been jumping between the big networks and haven't seen anything yet. There were a few spots on the local stations, though, but so far they've only given it about thirty seconds. There was one channel that went on for a few minutes, but that was it.”

He sat beside her and rested a hand on her knee. The contact of her skin conveyed a soothing effect. He said, “Huh. I would've thought it'd be worse. Maybe... but no. I don't want to say anything and jinx it...”

Turning her head so she could look him in the eye, she said, “I'm

not sure the general public understands what you've been up to.”

“Why is that?”

“Because the one channel that covered this for any length of time had to bring in an expert to explain why it's a big deal. I think it's because everyone's been hearing about AI for so long now. I mean, how long has it been since Siri's been around?”

“Well, yes, a while now, but that hardly counts—at least not when they first invented it.”

“Sure, but we've been dealing with it at least since then. Voice assistants, apps, home automation. When was the last time you spoke with an actual person on the phone? I mean when you were calling a business or something.”

“Yes, that is true...”

“So we've all been living with it to some degree or other for years,” she said. “Now this has come up, and it seems that half of the reporting has been to explain why this is different from what we're used to. And even when the expert explained it, I'm still not sure anyone got it. Just before you showed up, one of the local channels did one of those obnoxious street interview segments, you know? Just walking around asking random people what they thought about it? You know what happened? One of the people they stopped said, 'Well, can the damned thing fix my WiFi? I been trying to get it set up for weeks and the stupid cable company won't send nobody to my place to fix it up!' And then the whole segment devolved into the anchors laughing and cracking jokes about the guy's cable.”

Gilles grimaced and looked out the window. “Jesus...”

She continued, “The expert they had on the one channel was forced to explain how a real AI is made. They kept asking if you'd programmed Cronus and started peddling super-genius conspiracy theories as if you or some other scientist actually wrote the code for Cronus's intelligence line by line. They couldn't help themselves, and every time this expert had to correct them it was like they couldn't hear him.”

“You're kidding,” Gilles sighed. “They can't actually think—”

“Some people do, Babe.”

“Ugh,” he groaned. “I refuse to believe there are still that many ignorant people out there. A single neuron has thousands of synapses; for God's sake, there are neurons in the cerebellum alone that have hundreds of thousands of synapses! There are a hundred billion neurons in the human brain! There could be as many as one thousand trillion synapse connections, and we don't actually know what the real number is. There isn't a person or army of persons of any size that could develop that kind of complex functionality to run out of the box. The best we could ever do is build the platform and let the damned

thing grow itself; as we have done already.”

Anna rested a hand on his forearm and said, “Gilles... most people don't even understand what it means to write a simple program. It seems so easy and common to you because you've worked in this field every day of your career. But to the rest of us, it's like witchcraft.”

“Illiterate, backward cave-people,” he grumbled, and she hit him in the arm. Hard.

He regarded the TV for a while as he massaged his bruised shoulder, thinking. “Have you looked on Twitter,” he asked.

She cringed. “Yes. Things are... different, there. You're starting to trend again.”

He sighed. “Bad?”

She did not respond, as doing so would have been unnecessary.

“Yeah, well, they're all a bunch of shit-flinging fuckwits, anyway...”

“Oh!” she recoiled. “Ugly, Babe!”

“No, Anna, honestly. Fuck them all. Their bullshit crusades; swarming like a goddamned mob whether they know what the hell they're talking about or not—”

“Gilles, stop. I don't like being around you when you get like this. If you want to keep going on like that, you can do it on your own. I'll go in the other room or head out for the day. It's ugly.”

He heaved a long, trailing sigh. “I'm sorry. I'll stop.”

“We need to get out,” she said abruptly. “Let's go see the city, Babe, and get our minds on something else.”

He considered this. Touring a city full of people whom he regarded uncharitably at the present moment did not, in fact, sound like a good time.

“I don't know. I'm supposed to be waiting on a call from Anagnorisis, and I should be working on some sort of tests for Cronus... assuming they'll ever let me within a hundred miles of hi... of it again.”

“How did it go this morning?” she asked.

“Well, they didn't beat me with clubs, so that's a good thing.”

She tugged at his sleeve. “Baby? Baby, come on. Let's get out. Let's take a day and just be on our own. Don't think about the news or Cronus or the test you're supposed to be designing. Let's get away.”

“You don't understand, Anna. This is so big... if I get it wrong...”

She tugged harder. He looked at her; saw the look in her eyes. It was frantic, bordering on some breed of heartbreak, and he realized in a flash that she assigned a weight to her ability to bring him away; the value of their love was somehow defined by his willingness to hear that simple desire, to just go, to forsake all else. He understood his resistance might very well damage them in a way he could not later

repair and knew he must give in.

And because he understood that she was the thing he treasured in life before all things—before himself; even before his own greatness—giving in to her desire was reducible to a matter of reflex.

Gilles found that late-morning Manhattan was a different animal to rush-hour Manhattan. The news hounds either had not bothered to dig up the location of their hotel or had not yet managed to purchase that information, so the sidewalk outside the lobby was about as busy as any other stretch of sidewalk in the immediate area, which was not that much. People passed by on foot at an easy pace with comfortable buffers of space surrounding them, many engaged in private conversations. Some of them walked alone, and the other end of that conversation was an invisible entity, maybe human or maybe not. Even so, he was glad he had remembered to grab a hat and sunglasses on the way out. Most of the drones whizzing by overhead were engaged in some form of delivery service (bike messengers having gone extinct within the confines of the city) but Gilles was ever aware of the smaller, slower-moving units. The only job they had was to watch.

Manhattan was much smaller than he had imagined. When Anna told him they could walk from one side to the other—from the Hudson to the East River—in about twenty minutes, he was convinced she pulled his leg. Then she proved it, and when he stood against the railing with Pier 81 on his right and the Ferry Terminal on his left, he shook his head at the impenetrable murk of the water below and laughed. She asked him why he did, and smiling, he said that all the movies had convinced him the place stretched on forever. She smiled and would have told him that doing the job length-wise was another thing altogether but his laughter made her happy the way a coughing fit makes you happy, when it passes by without turning into something worse, like a heart attack.

She walked him through Times Square and showed him all the things she had discovered the previous day while alone; pretending to see all of the wonders it held for the first time right along with him. They stood together holding hands on the sidewalk, heads craned up at the jumbled wall of smiling faces, exploding colors, and spinning products. It all stretched impossibly above them, the smallest presentation measuring eighty feet from corner to corner, entrapping them in a deformed circle like the walls of a crumbling digital Colosseum. He pointed at a narrow building that stretched so high as to challenge the dominion of the clouds, where a giant's hand

upended a can of Coke as large as a city bus, over and over and over again. The deep, brown liquid spilled down and down the side of the building, where it was caught at the bottom by a tall glass, perfect in every way. The size of the building made that glass look about normal to Gilles but he knew it was probably bigger than the house they lived in back home.

He was stricken by the silence of that place at that specific time. Foot and motorized traffic seemed minimal to him, though the only frame of reference he had was the morning rush, and he had not seen Times Square in a rush. He supposed it must get pretty loud during those periods. Now they were surrounded by a calmness that seemed unnatural in all that hugeness and bright motion; the easy sough of passing car tires; the occasional rattle of an old combustion engine; the insistent warning alarm of reversing construction equipment; and the silence of people enclosed within the bubble of their own universe as they passed, their only sound the knocking of heels on pavement. He wondered why he always thought this place must sound like the rushing roar of a filled stadium no matter the time of day. He wondered why it felt so close and wrong.

Anna saw the expression in his eyes after a while and knew what it meant. She was still in the process of learning why some things impacted him as they did but she had loved him long enough to understand these things sometimes did occur. She pulled gently at his hand and he smiled at her a moment after and she knew it was alright again. She said, "Let's head up Broadway awhile. There's something in that direction I want you to see."

"More giant signs?" he asked.

"No. Something quite different."

"Good..."

They walked for what seemed a long time through a canyon of buildings, picking their way from sidewalk to sidewalk at the chirping command of crosswalk lights, dodging under and around scaffolding. After four blocks Gilles was puffing for breath and the color he felt in his cheeks was pleasant and invigorating. He called out to ask, as Anna had ranged a few yards ahead, if there was always construction everywhere. She hollered back that she thought there was. He said little after that, concentrating instead on his breathing. Sometimes he concentrated on the vigorous swing of her hips as she walked ahead of him and smiled unconsciously.

The canyon opened up eventually on a round-about, and here the cars seemed more numerous, running by in a constant stream like blood cells through an artery. He still felt the sentinel buildings looming over him, weighing down upon his shoulders and neck to scrutinize, but he also felt as if he had a chance of escaping them.



There was more open sky overhead than he would have hoped for to the east, with chariots of cloud galloping along treetops. He felt his heart pulled toward them, and a moment later Anna took up his hand again and pulled in the direction of his heart. They passed a golden goddess poised either for war or peace astride three frothing, handsome horses and Gilles despaired of ever learning her name as they plunged headlong into the trees. They left the box canyons of concrete and glass behind in the other world.

A canopy closed in overhead, bathing them in a green glow like light through colored glass, and he saw that the sky and the clouds were hidden above it. She took him down a wide paved avenue, walled on either side with low iron fences. Park benches dotted the way. Sometimes they held people. People passed them by as well, moving in differing directions. He saw people on bicycles and sometimes on scooters. They all looked unconcerned; engaged in their own private thoughts. Gilles liked that about them.

His hand sometimes slipped from Anna's as they strolled along but always found its way back, like exhausted lovers in bed occasionally coming around for another kiss. He felt the pulse of her heart through her thumb and it was warm and good like the day around him, and the pavement beneath his feet did not jar with each step, and the temperature was perfect under the canopy with the slow, sweet breeze, and he began to remember happiness.

She took him to the center of a large grass field opened wide under the yawning sky. The trees were now far away at the edges and, beyond them, the buildings looking over their tops. But the buildings were even further than the trees and did not bother him so much. There were many people sharing the field with them, huddled together in their own groups or lounging alone, dotting the landscape. Annalise led him to a wide patch of empty green and made him lay down on his back. It was damp and he could feel it beginning to seep into his clothes but then she sat down, crossed her legs, and laid his head upon her calves. Then he could see only clouds and sky and her and everything else surrounding them disappeared from the world.

She gave him a few minutes' worth of silence and then asked, "Better now?"

He closed his eyes to concentrate on the warmth and nodded.

She gave him some more time. He was not sure how much but he soon realized he was beginning to drift off when she spoke again.

"What now?"

He cracked his eyes open to look up at her. Her face was another sun.

"They won't find anything besides my notes. They'll have to let me

back in after this is all done. You...you're quite sure? You haven't spoken to anyone?"

She shook her head and wisps of burnished gold brushed his face.

"Something leaked out somehow..." he muttered.

"Are they investigating their own as hard as you?"

"Yes," he said. "I don't imagine it'll be very popular, though."

"Good," she spat.

"What?"

Another tickle of hair over his face. "Because someone in there did this and now this is happening to you. Whoever it is, I want them to lose their job over it."

He reached up and found her hand. The pulse was still within her thumb and he smiled.

"Assume you get back in," she continued. "What then?"

Gilles sighed and shrugged. Damp points of fabric pulled away from his shoulders and chilled him. "This was much easier when nobody knew what we were doing. Only a small group of people to review my findings. Let them vet it all, and if it turned out later that I got it right, I could have published a paper; maybe even written a book a few years down the line. Now... now everyone knows. They'll be waiting for me. They'll be waiting for what I determine. The whole world... or as much of the world as matters. If I get it wrong I'll never hear the end of it; never get away from it. I see it coming already. Suppose I come out and say that Cronus... *is*. The story is out there, now. That finding will rip across the internet. It'll snowball and explode and become something terrible. And then after that... after they review my findings... suppose they decide I was wrong? My name will become a punchline."

Her hand had begun to stroke his forehead as he spoke. He was aware of it in a pleasant way but the feeling dulled the more he spoke.

"And suppose it is conscious and I say it's not? There may or may not still be a review after that, but what if none of us get it right? And it's aware the way it is and knows it must continue to perform or be terminated?"

"But what if you say he's aware and you get it right?" Anna asked.

Gilles shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe worse? It seems to be that no matter how many people are out there, no matter how many of them you manage to please, there are always an equal number screaming for your head. Who can say?"

"But who could possibly have a problem with that?"

"As I said, I don't know. I'm sure someone will find a way, though."

"Let's leave, Gilles. Tonight. Call Reggie up; let him know. The situation has become impossible and you just want out. He'll

understand. After everything that's happened with Guardian, you know he will."

"I can't," he sighed.

"Why?"

"Because I can't walk away. I have to know, Anna."

"You don't..."

"Yes. I do. I can't leave it."

She looked away and he felt the full force of the sun spear into his face. His eyes had been closed but the energy of that distant star bore through his lids and all the world screamed in red. He draped a forearm across his brow.

"You're mad at me," he said.

"No. I knew who you were when I married you. But sometimes I wonder."

"About?"

"I wonder what you love more. Me? Or the puzzle?"

"What puzzle?" he asked.

"Whatever puzzle you happen to be working on."

"You. Always you."

"I wonder..." Her voice trailed off.

He looked up at her, fighting against the bitter rays of the sun, and found her face somewhere far away. He took her cheek in hand and said, "Always you."

"But you won't leave tonight."

"Anna..."

"What?"

"What if... what if it is?"

She said nothing in response. He pulled his hand away. She caught it, kissed it, and then rested it down upon his chest.

They became quiet again and waited until the sun moved to a place where it was not so punishing. He felt the coolness of shifting shadows and heard her ask, "Do you know how you'll do it?"

"No," he said simply. "The best I have is to build up enough evidence pointing in one direction or the other; enough of it that I'm convinced. So that I can then try to convince others."

"Well, how would you do that with a human?"

"A human?"

"Yes. You said to me that the problem is the same for a computer as it is for a human, right? So that means if someone asked you to prove that a human was conscious you'd be having just as much trouble."

He thought over this a moment, scratching idly at his ribs. "That's not quite right. I'm a human, too. Everyone reviewing my results would be human. There would be a bias in the direction of a positive

finding. If we found in the negative, it would mean we'd have to start asking questions about the validity of our own awareness. It would be in our best interests to state that the subject was aware."

"And it's not in your best interests to find that a computer is aware because it's different?"

"Well... strictly speaking, yes."

He felt her shift under his head, so he sat up to let her move around. She thanked him, stretched out her feet, and began slapping lightly at her shins. "Explain why that is," she said.

"Easy. Please name for me a species that challenges humankind for primacy over this planet."

She took a moment to answer and he saw from the expression of her face that she had been momentarily thrown. "I can't think of any."

"Yes," he agreed. "That is because we have killed them all."

She thought on this as well and said, "You're saying the computers become killer robots?"

He smiled and worked hard not to laugh at this. "No, I should think that unlikely. All I'm saying is that when we collectively identify competition, we tend, historically speaking, to treat that competition rather harshly. Along that line of reasoning, finding that Cronus is just a computer is desirable, both for its safety...and our psychic well-being as a species."

She slumped over her knees as she considered this. While he waited for her to respond, he began to pull individual blades of grass from the ground and split them carefully down the middle.

"Do you think you'd do that?" she finally asked. "Give a wrong answer on purpose?"

"I do not know," he said.

She shook her head and looked off at two children tossing a Frisbee between each other. Her eyes were wide and unsettled. He wanted to say something but could not think of what that might be.

Finally, she said, "Okay, let's forget that for now. Assume you don't have to worry about it. Let's pretend you have two subjects; a human and Cronus. They both have the same voice and they're locked in separate rooms so you can't see them and you have to do the job on both of them; determine whether they're conscious or not. How would you do that?"

He smiled broadly at this and said, "Maybe you should have been a scientist."

She smiled back uncertainly and shook her head.

"You basically just described the Turing Test."

"No," she said, "that's not how it goes... is it?"

"Basically, yes, it's the same thing. The theory is that you lock the computer and the human away in different rooms, just like you said,

and talk to them both for some period of time. If, at the end of the test, you can't tell which subject is human and which is machine, the machine is said to have passed and therefore must be considered truly intelligent."

Anna scoffed and said, "Maybe I'd better ask for a raise. I always thought it was different. Like... an SAT test or something that you gave to the computer."

Gilles smiled and said, "Not quite..."

"Well, fine, then. I've given you the setup. Now, mister doctor, how do you run your test? Something medical?"

"Medical..." he whispered thoughtfully.

"Assume a patient was in a deep coma," she said. "What kind of test would you run to see if he was a vegetable?"

"Well, there are a number of simple tests you'd run, many reflexive. One way is to squirt some ice water into the ear canal and see how his eyes track. But if you're looking for a specific device to measure brain activity, that's just an EEG."

"Okay, okay," she nodded excitedly. "Can you use an EEG on Cronus?"

Gilles shook his head. "An EEG just measures electrical activity in the brain, Babe. The part of Cronus that makes him work is all electrical signals and lights. The EEG would probably have a fit, assuming I could figure out where to connect the damned thing."

"But is there something you could use that's like an EEG for a computer? Some sort of device that gives you a hard number that you could point to and say, 'Here, look at this! This says there's more going on than just basic circuitry!'"

He thought about her question before he was forced to shake his head yet again. "I can't think of a single thing. I doubt such a thing has even been considered. Don't feel bad, you're asking all the right questions. It's just that we're back to the fundamental problem. Nobody really understands what consciousness actually is. The way we detect its existence in humans is pathetic. Really; squirting water in people's ears and measuring neurological activity is about as far as anyone's gotten."

"I can't believe that's all we've figured out," she grouched. "Everything else that's been achieved and in this one area...nobody's even tried? It's so basic!"

"Maybe someone has figured something out but I sure haven't heard of it. I'd have to get on the internet and start digging around."

It was as though he had uttered magic words. She looked at him sharply, shrugged, and stood fluidly from the ground. He took a moment to admire her grace and then asked, "What's up?"

She held her hand out to him. "Lunch. After that, back to our

room. You've got some homework to do, buddy."

"Homework?"

"You just said it yourself. You need to start doing some research. You're sure as hell not accomplishing that out in the middle of this field."

She grabbed onto his hand and hauled him up. He followed her obediently as she led the way to the nearest walking path. He was used to her focus; the kind that bubbled up to the forefront when a plan of attack was clear. At times, it was all he could do to hold on.

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He spent the rest of the afternoon lost in Anna's tablet searching down digital back alleys for any reasonable method he could cannibalize for his purposes. He had fallen back to generalized queries when his initial attempts failed. The first thing Gilles had tapped into the screen was the pointed question: "How can you tell if a computer has become self-aware?"

The results this simple question produced were dubious, as he had known they would be. Apart from the various selection of Science Fiction material, the primary yield consisted of articles positing how a self-aware computer might be constructed, how it might behave, if it were possible that such a thing could exist, the earliest date at which it might exist, and numerous items unhelpfully discussing the current state of technology and its relation to the now-outdated Turing Test. He had known the question for a pointless one before submitting it, and yet he felt it had to be attempted, if only for the ability to say he had tried if anyone asked.

He began to look into the latest developments in medicine for inspiration. During this line of inquiry he found an article detailing a new metric defining the point at which a human could be considered truly conscious. He was excited at this discovery, noting that a hard number had been defined, but then read further and realized it was no good at all. The greatest applicability for the technique was to the field of anesthesiology, in which the practitioner must determine a patient sufficiently "under" before allowing the surgeon to apply a knife. In other words, the measurement was only for a being already known to possess consciousness rather than some system altogether unknown from the outset. Additionally, the measurement required the use of an electroencephalogram, a device so rudimentary in function that the thought of even trying to apply it to Cronus inspired Gilles to exhausted giggles. Where, he wondered, would the electrodes be connected? Directly to a PCB or a perhaps a server case somewhere?

He continued to search, finding nothing else as promising as the

EEG article, and when he glanced out the window to see the darkening sky, he fell back into the couch and rubbed his eyes. He heard the low drone of the TV in the bedroom and considered going back there to crawl in alongside Annalise, lying to himself that he only required a bit of rest. He tapped a few more links to prove to himself this was so...and then found something new.

He found something quite new: an old video posted sometime within the last five years by a man named Peter Nowak.

Gilles watched the video for a few minutes, scoffed, and nearly backed out of it on the basis of its absurdity alone. He happened to glance at the progress bar before doing so, finger hovering over screen, and decided on a whim to watch through to the end. He could use the amusement.

As the video progressed he became less amused. Further, he began to feel uncomfortable as it neared the end. Following the completion of this first video, he spent a good portion of time—a few hours at least—learning everything he could about the classical double slit experiment. When he thought he understood the mechanics of the experiment (or at least understood the mechanics as well as anyone might; there came a point when the behavior of the system simply baffled any attempts at understanding), he went back and watched the Nowak video again.

On the second viewing, he felt less dismissive. He searched for additional information on Nowak's experiments and found a collection of scientific publications which detailed a number of procedures spanning thousands of test subjects over several years. He buried himself in the details, scribbling notes on hotel stationery until the tablet was exhausted and he had to run to the bedroom to get another. As he worked, a hypothesis began to grow in the pit of his mind like a red ember, neurons firing in symphony, and his eyes began to dry. He brushed at his forehead periodically and when he rested his fingertips upon the page they left prints of oil. He read and wrote, wrote and read, until his bladder screamed and he begrudged the time required to go empty it, and when he came back to his chair his hands nearly trembled for the time he had lost. His head began to float at the same time his surroundings began to brighten. The lights of nearby buildings extinguished, undetected by Gilles, who tapped away on his wife's tablet to compose a parts list. He was concerned when he saw how the price tag grew but then remembered that this was for Anagnorisis Technologies and relaxed. If they were serious, and he had every reason to suspect they were, price would be no barrier.

He worked until it made no sense to continue further; until four pads were filled completely with notes and diagrams, until his hand ached for a keyboard and his mind ached for a calculator app. He

looked around for his phone so he could call Kevin and demand his laptop be returned before he remembered they had his phone as well. He looked out on the city a few moments, wondering when it had been that the sun had returned, and when he saw from the clock that it was 6:30, he decided Kevin must be awake. He rung the front desk from the antique on the side table, had himself routed to Anagnorisis, and was stopped up short by their automated phone menu system. He took a few circuits through the menu's selections until he found Kevin's extension and hit a brick wall when he was redirected to voice mail. He cursed, hung up, and then prepared to dial Reggie. He hesitated. He did not actually know Reggie's number; not by heart.

He went to the other room and retrieved his wife's phone from the dock, unlocked the screen, and cast about in her address book until he found the number he desired (she had demanded Reggie's cell number some time ago when she found the process of getting Gilles directly to be hit or miss). He dialed the number and waited an unacceptable period of time before Reggie picked up.

He heard muffled fumbling, then a slurred voice. "Anna? What's going on? Are you guys okay? Is Gilles alright?"

"It's me, Reggie."

"Gilles? What—"

"I'm calling from Anna's phone. They still have mine."

"Oh... right. What's going on?"

"I need Kevin's number. His cell number, Reggie."

"His—Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Reggie..."

"Ugh, hang on a minute. Goddamn it, Gilles..."

His voice trailed off as he set the phone down. Gilles sat in the chair waiting, rapidly tapping his foot and blinking his burning eyes. There was a glare coming in through the window that made him want to draw the curtains but he refused to step away from the table until Reggie returned, irrationally concluding that doing so would somehow impact Reggie's ability to respond. When he heard silence for longer than he thought was reasonable, he wondered if he should not hang up and dial again, but then detected the sound of a door closing somewhere far away, and then Reggie was back on the phone. He gave Gilles the number and then asked what time it was in New York.

Gilles told him.

Reggie said to wait another hour before blowing up Kevin's phone. Gilles told him he would, hung up, and then dialed Kevin's number.

Kevin answered much faster than Reggie, for which Gilles felt a wave of blind gratitude. He wondered for a split second if he was somehow being disloyal but then he heard the gentle, energetic voice of Kevin on the other end and allowed himself to forget the concern.



There were only a few words of strained pleasantries before Gilles could no longer restrain himself.

"I need to get back into that lab, Kevin."

"Ah. Yes. Well, we're-we're still going over that, right now, Gilles."

"Have your guys found anything?"

"No, actually I had that on my list to do first thing this morning. Both the laptop and phone check clean."

"Okay," Gilles sighed. "No problem, then. Let me in there."

"It's not that easy."

"Well, why?"

Now he heard Kevin sigh, and the sound of it carried a hesitance Gilles did not like. "You've checked out, so now they're turning all attention to our own employees. This is starting to heat up, Gilles. There're protesters gathered out at the lab."

"Protesters! What is it now?"

"They appear to be religious fundamentalists of some sort. Big, flashy signs saying such things as 'Only God Can Create Life' and the like. I saw a few verses quoted as well; there's a camera crew out there, obviously. It's not horrendous... yet. I think I only counted about twenty or so people out there. My guess is it's a local church that got bored waiting for Bingo Night to come around but... it doesn't look too hot on the news. You know how they do; close-in shots so the crowd looks bigger."

Gilles squeezed his eyes shut and drew a slow breath. "You mean to tell me they want to put a stop to this because...because of a handful of Bible-thumpers?"

"Well, that is a part of it. The main issue is that the leak has not yet been identified, so everyone's really jumpy. We're getting this incident under control right now, but a lot of my colleagues wonder what point there is in continuing if someone just leaks out more information before we're ready. We'll just be right back in the pot. There's a bunch of attention from the media, which nobody likes, and Linnéa's worried about moving forward until we have a plug. You may come to learn this about her if any kind of partnership develops out of this: the one thing Linnéa hates above all else is the wrong kind of media attention."

Leaning over the desktop, Gilles said, "I think that's universal among executives. Okay, I get it. And it doesn't matter, Kevin. You've gotta get me in there."

"You've found something, Gilles, or you think you have. What is it?"

Gilles began to explain but Kevin stopped him about three minutes in. "How long will this take, Gilles?"

"You're a physicist, aren't you, Kevin? You're familiar with a

double—”

“Yes, of course I am. I mean how long will this take you to explain to an executive?”

Gilles gave it some thought. “Maybe a while.”

“Do you think you can get it into a Power-Point by 2:00?”

Gilles grunted, then blinked hard. He needed a good dash of water to the face. “That’s part of why I called. I need my PC back so I can finish formulating the test setup.”

“I see. I can’t promise anything but I’ll try to have it over in your hands by 10:00. If I can, will you be able to get that presentation together?”

“Ugh... I mean I can, but... I’d really rather—”

“Executives love Power-Points, Gilles. It’s one of only two languages they understand.”

Gilles sat up in his chair. “What’s the other?”

“Financial Accounting. I’ll get your PC back out to you. Get those slides together. I can’t promise a meeting at 2:00; it might happen a little later. But that should give me enough time to shuffle everyone’s schedule around. Is this a good number to reach you at?”

“Send me back my phone and you can reach me on that.”

“Ah, right. You got it; I’ll send both items over.”

“Thanks, Kevin. Seriously... just thanks.”

“Make sure to use lots of pictures, Gilles. Big, pretty ones with lots of colors. Animations, too, if you can find them.”

Gilles was halfway to the shower when Kevin disconnected.

He received a call from the front desk an hour later. Annalise was still asleep so he rushed across the floor to snatch up the phone before it could ring again.

“Hello?”

“Good morning, Mr. Guattari, this is the front desk. I'm calling to inform you that a package has arrived for you.”

“Yes, excellent. Send it up, please.”

“I'm sorry, sir, I would have but I cannot. The messenger requires you receive it personally.”

He almost asked her to send the messenger up with the package but then realized what the problem must be. “Uh... messengers aren't allowed among the rooms, then?”

“No, sir. It makes the guests uncomfortable.”

“Of course. I'll be down momentarily.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The messenger crouched low over the package on the lobby floor like some giant, prehistoric insect sucking the life from a small mammal. Gilles nodded to the receptionist, who smiled back at him beneath flat eyes and approached. It detected his proximity within ten feet and a collection of blades began to churn the air silently, the unit beeping all the while. As it rose from the ground, Gilles marveled, as he always did, at the ability of each rotor blade cowling to quiet the drone's passage and smiled at the irony that such silence required the steadily beeping alarm to keep people from walking into it.

They might have just left the rotors loud and avoided the hassle.

It approached slowly with the package, regarding him with its single fish-eye lens. He tilted his head back so that it would have a direct shot of his face and said, “Gilles Guattari.”

There was a brief pause, then a pleasant musical chime. The parcel to which it clung lowered by an inch and then was dropped into his outstretched hands. Gilles noted the messenger's stabilization logic was exquisite; it rose no more than a centimeter when the ballast was released, and Gilles was nearly certain he heard the rotors slow beforehand, but it had been so close. He did not know which had occurred first, not for sure. He watched the messenger as it departed and then rushed back to the elevator, already beginning to peel the wrapping away with a clutching left hand.

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Kevin Roth was as good as his word. Gilles found himself back in the board room at 2:15 setting up for a 2:30 presentation, somewhat shocked at how quickly things had been arranged. Kevin carried himself with an easy-going air, yet it must be that he had some serious pull. Executives lived their lives meeting to meeting, as Gilles well knew. The fact Kevin had the ability to restructure the day of so many people—people whose days must have been scheduled weeks in advance—spoke volumes.

Gilles tried not to fidget as the others began to filter in. Marcus came first, choosing a seat near the head of the table opposite Kevin. Then a collection of others wandered in to fill additional seats. Many of them trailed assistants in their wake that carried small laptops or tablets. The assistants took seats of inferior station along the wall and windows. Linnéa and her satellites appeared five minutes late, and he wondered if that was intentional.

He sat at the far end of the table, closest to the enormous display. He judged it to be something like a hundred inches at least, and the appearance of his computer's desktop looked bizarre spread out over so much real estate. He sat silently and stared at the screen of his computer, listening with one ear to side discussions, muted coughs, the occasional joke, and resisted the urge to begin.

Eventually, Linnéa glanced at Kevin, who nodded at Gilles. He knew, then, that there was to be no more delay. He threw the first slide of his presentation to the monitor and began, "The Double Slit Experiment was a demonstration first performed in 1801—"

"Stop," Marcus said. Gilles turned to look at him along with everyone else. "Are you about to waste this room's time with an explanation of a high school science project? Is that really what you're about to do?"

Gilles managed to avoid stammering when he responded. He was pleased with this victory. "I imagine, Mr. Genaro, that much of this will be elementary for many in this room. However, I regret I must ask your indulgence as I go over the basics. Understanding is critical to..."

Marcus leaned over and began to whisper into Linnéa's ear. Gilles considered pressing on with his explanation but saw little point in persisting if Marcus refused to listen. He glanced at Kevin, who only shook his head with an expression that said to "just give it a moment."

They chattered back and forth a while, Linnéa impassive while Marcus became more animated with each breath. Finally, Linnéa cut him off by saying loud enough for all to hear, "I don't understand it, Marcus. It doesn't matter to me that you or anyone else does. I need to understand as well if I'm going to make any kind of decision. Now will

you let him continue or must I ask you to leave?"

The conference room, though already quiet, became barren. Marcus dipped his head and leaned back into his chair. He stared at the desktop disconsolately, and Linnéa nodded to Gilles. "Please continue."

He cleared his throat and struggled to regain his place. It was not easy with all those faces looking back at him.

"Thank you... thank you. Uh, as I was saying... the, uh... the Double-Slit Experiment..." He glanced at his computer, took a breath, and nodded. He thought for a moment about the speech he had prepared, about the assumptions he had made regarding his audience, and abandoned it all on the spot. He looked at Linnéa only and plunged ahead as if she were a life raft at the center of a churning ocean.

"I'll ask you to imagine, for a moment, that you're in a dark room with a flashlight. You shine that light against a wall. What do you see?"

Linnéa glanced momentarily at the others and then said, "The beam of light projected on the wall."

"Exactly. Now, I'll ask you to imagine placing a shield in between the flashlight and the wall. Imagine that the flashlight has a narrow beam so that the light it emits can't get around the sides of the shield. You see the light hitting only the shield, right? It does not reach the wall on the other side."

Linnéa nodded.

"Thank you. Now cut a vertical slit in that shield. What happens?"

"The light gets through to the wall again."

"And does it look the same as it did before?"

Linnéa thought it over. "No. It's focused through the slit."

"Yes," Gilles nodded. He pressed a key on his computer, and a slide appeared on the monitor depicting the scenario he had just described. The resulting band of light on the wall was rendered as a vertical white bar, diffuse around the edges.

"You'll note," he continued, that the edges of the light fade to the sides. There's a good reason for this; do you know why it is?"

Linnéa nodded, moved to speak, and then thought for a moment. Then she said, "Well, light travels in a wave. So it's not going to be sheared off perfectly by the hole in that shield. It just radiates out."

"Exactly," Gilles smiled. He tapped his computer again, and an animation appeared. It showed a gun firing balls at a shield with a vertical slit. Many of the balls hit the sides of the shield itself and stuck to it, but many passed through the slit as well, where they stuck to the wall beyond in a thin, vertical line. "What you've just zeroed in on is the difference in behavior between particles and waves. A

particle behaves in what we call a corpuscular fashion; it's a finite bit of matter that moves as you'd expect. It travels in a straight path, we can predict its position accurately, and for lack of eloquence, it behaves, more or less, like the balls you see in this animation. A wave, however, is different."

The image on the monitor was replaced with a new scene. It showed the same shield with a slit in the middle, now lowered into a tub of water. The flashlight, replaced with a floating ball was placed on the water's surface and pushed up and down vigorously so that waves radiated out from its edges. These waves traveled toward the shield, passed through the slit, and began to radiate again from the other side.

Gilles said, "Notice, here, that when the waves pass through the slit, they are focused down to the width of the slit and then widen out again on the other side of the shield. It is as though the slit acts as a new wave source independent of the ball, which it is. The wave widens out again as it travels, impacts the far wall, and the part of the wave that hits the wall first—its leading center edge—describes the point of greatest impact. Light behaves just as the water in this animation. It hits the slit of the shield, is focused, and radiates out again toward the wall, and the point of greatest impact is where you see the brightest light... the vertical bar of diffuse light. Everyone with me so far?"

Linnéa nodded while Marcus rolled his eyes. Kevin winked.

"Good. Now I'll ask you to consider particles again; please bear with me."

The monitor showed the ball-firing gun, only this time the shield had two vertical slits running parallel to each other. Those balls that managed to pass through each slit defined two vertical lines against the far wall.

"Now we have the famous double-slit. In the case of corpuscular behavior, we can see how particles passing through each slit create two vertical bars on the far wall, correct? May I ask you to predict the result of a wave passing through the same double-slit shield?"

Marcus sat up as if he would speak, glanced at Linnéa, and then settled back into his chair again with a sigh. She peered at the screen for a moment, eyes narrowed, and Gilles briefly wondered if he had overstepped. Finally, she said, "I assume two bands of light, just like the balls, but I'm also guessing that's not the case; otherwise you wouldn't have bothered to ask."

Gilles nodded and placed a still image on the monitor. It showed the light source, the double-slit shield, and on the far wall, a wide band of alternating bars of dark and light, repeating like horizontal train tracks. Linnéa sat up in her seat at this, betraying interest despite

her usual reserve. She said, "Mr. Guattari... I as yet have no idea what this has to do with the problem at hand, and yet I must admit... you have my curiosity for the moment. I think we'd better pick this up, though."

Gilles winced and said, "I know, ma'am, it is painfully slow. But I promise you, this is all relevant. It is so important that we understand the basics, here, before getting to the heart of the matter. If we get to the end of this and you feel as though I've spent your time needlessly, I invite you to pitch me out into the street."

She smiled at this and said, "That's a deal."

"Thank you, ma'am. What you now see projected onto the wall is called an Interference Pattern. The reasons for its occurrence are surprisingly straight-forward, however, to help us visualize it, we're forced to return to our tub of water..."

The image was replaced by the tub with the oscillating ball, yet the shield now featured two vertical slits. The single wave generated by the ball hit these and was divided on the other side into two waves traveling in the same direction at the same speed. The waves moved out in concentric circles, widening as they went until the wave from one slit overlapped the wave from the other. The points at which the two wave edges intersected were highlighted brightly, and they projected out from the shield in diagonal lines, impacting the far wall at regular intervals. The wall glowed at the points where the wave intersections impacted, illuminating so that a pattern emerged like horizontal train tracks.

"This should hopefully illustrate the phenomenon," Gilles said. "Each point where the waves overlap describes a peak—a point of intensity greater than any one position on a singular wave. The two waves combine together at these peaks, amplifying each other, and create a repeating pattern of points of greatest impact along the wall. Again, light behaves just like water; it is just a wave, after all, and so you can now hopefully understand why we get an interference pattern when we project light through two slits. If something is corpuscular or behaves like a particle, then it will travel either through one slit or the other, and you get two bands of impacts on the other side. If something is contiguous, like a wave, it passes through both slits at the same time, divides into two separate wave sources, and then those two sources interfere with each other, create a repeating band of peak impact points on the screen, and that's why you get that picket fence effect."

He glanced at Kevin to gauge how he was doing, who showed him an extended thumb partially hidden behind a forearm. Emboldened, Gilles continued.

"Now we get to the part of this experiment where all logic sadly

falls apart. I'm speaking, of course, of quantum mechanics. You see, somewhere around 1927 scientists discovered that certain particles behave just like light. And this was really unfortunate because up to that point, we thought we had a handle on how the world works. Particles behaved like particles and waves behaved like waves. Everything behaved itself, and that was good.

"But now they found that electrons—discrete particles that are observable as such—shot through the double slit produced an interference pattern, just like a light wave.

"Electrons are a thing that can be controlled to a finite degree. When they shot a stream of them through a double-slit, the initial expectation was that, because they are corpuscular in concept, two vertical impact lines would present on the other side of the shield. This is not what they observed. They got an interference pattern. So they started trying to understand what was happening and came up with all sorts of oddball theories about why this may be; stating that perhaps the electrons themselves were somehow splitting before passing through each slit, such that there were two coming out the other end like our theoretical wave of water, and interfered in some way with each other on the opposing side. They tried to get some control of the situation by using a special gun capable of firing single electrons at the shield, one at a time, just like a peashooter. Again, doing everything they could to make the corpuscular particle behave in a corpuscular fashion..."

Gilles changed the image on the screen to a new animation. It showed a gun pointed at a double-slit shield with a gray screen on the other side. The gun flashed at regular intervals to show that it was shooting. However, no projectile appeared. Instead, only the impact point of the projectile was highlighted as a small dot on the far screen. Impacts were shown one after the other; they sped up over time until a pattern began to emerge—the interference pattern of a waveform, now shown as a collection of thousands of dots on the screen arranged in tight, vertical clusters.

"So this is a big problem, right?" Gilles continued. "You have a gun that shoots a single particle at a time, which you know should be passing through either one slit or the other—not both—or not passing through at all if it impacts the shield. There should be two, definite bands on the far wall, not an interference pattern. They scratched their heads at this for a while. A particle ought to travel in a more or less straight line. Their results suggested it wasn't. The results suggested something more like this..."

He switched the image. The electron gun flashed, and a diaphanous, red wave emanated from the barrel, passed through the two slits like the water in the earlier example, divided into two waves,



and impacted the wall. When they hit the wall, a single point was illuminated, seemingly at random. More waves fired from the gun, traveling and dividing in similar fashion. Each time the waveform impacted the wall, a new point was highlighted at random. The speed of the animation increased until thousands of impacts appeared, revealing the interference pattern.

“Individual particles moving through space in a wave pattern,” said Gilles. “The next step, obviously, is to observe this behavior directly. So far as they could tell, in order for the electrons to behave this way, they would have to accept the idea that a single particle was passing through both slits at the same time. This was clearly an unsettling thought, challenging everything they understood (or thought they understood) about physics at the time. So what they did was place a measuring device on the opposite side of the shield that was capable of detecting when an electron passed through a slit and, if it did, would issue a little beep. Using that, they would be able to tell just what was happening; if the electron was passing through only one slit or both, or some other as-yet unimagined behavior.

“And, when they did this, a horrible thing occurred. Suddenly, with the inclusion of the measuring device, the electrons ceased to function as a wave. They passed discretely through either one slit or the other, and presented two vertical lines on the screen just like balls fired from a gun... in fact, just as the scientists had predicted would happen in the first place. No interference pattern whatsoever. Even worse, when they turned off the measuring device, the interference pattern re-emerged. Instantaneously.

“In other words, the simple act of observation collapsed the waveform and made the particle behave like a damned particle. What does that mean? It means that each singular particle behaves like a wave as it travels, each one doing its own part to contribute to that interference pattern until it impacts the screen at a specific point, and suddenly at impact, it looks like a particle again. Unless you happen to watch it as it travels, at which point it just behaves like a particle for the entire trip. The fundamental behavior of the electron is changed just through the act of observation.”

Linnéa was sitting bolt-upright in her seat. She glanced over at Kevin, who nodded slowly, and then back at Gilles. Despite the fact that he had not yet reached his actual point, he saw that she was fighting to hide a smile and he knew he had her. He began to relax.

“It is the ability to collapse this waveform that I call your attention to. Hopefully, if I’m right, we can exploit this behavior to determine the state of Cronus. To determine, rather, if Cronus has achieved a conscious state.”

Marcus raised his hand to speak, and Gilles nodded to him.

“If the rest of you will allow me, I’m perfectly familiar with the double-slit experiment. Gilles, if I may, how do you propose to do this? Conscious observation is not required to collapse the waveform. You just need to use a device to monitor the electron. I can do that with a simple piece of hardware for a bit of cash.”

In answer, Gilles said, “I would now like to direct your attention to one Dr. Peter Nowak. He conducted a number of experiments into the nature of consciousness some years back using the double-slit platform as a foundational basis; a kind of measuring device, if you will.

“The configuration of his test was modified in certain ways from the classical Double-Slit experiment. The monitoring device was first removed. The system itself consisted of a helium-neon laser projected through a Neutral Density Filter toward the double-slit, and on the other side of that, they set up a CCD line camera.

“The double-slit and camera were placed inside a box in a sealed-system configuration. This part is important; it means that the double-slit itself cannot be observed, either by instrument or organism. The line camera was three-thousand pixels long, capable of detecting patterns of light and dark just like the classical interference pattern we’ve already covered. Now, the light bands of the interference pattern closest in proximity to the double-slit (the center of the pattern) are brighter than those out to the side, which are further away. When you plot these values of intensity in a computer, you get something that looks rather similar to a bell curve. This information is run through a Fourier transform, which results in a value representing the total spectral power of the waveform.”

He had been flipping through slides rapidly during this part of his presentation, pausing briefly at each to show a succession of test diagram, hardware configuration, and various charts. He ended on two graphs, the top of which showed the bell curve he had mentioned while the bottom displayed a reading of total spectral power. This bottom graph looked to Linnéa like the digital thump of a heart monitor.

“And now we come to the part of the experiment that most benefits our situation,” Gilles continued. “The difference between an interference pattern and a fully collapsed waveform—in other words, those situations where the particle is actively measured as it passes through the slit—is quite extreme. On one hand, you have the complete behavior of a wave and, on the other, the complete behavior of a particle. It’s almost as if they’re digital states, isn’t it? But as we all know and sometimes like to complain over, the entirety of reality is an analog experience, spectral in nature, reducible only to matters of degree, frequency, and intensity. A true or false state is really just our gross attempt to speed up and simplify the process of computation and

observation.

“The hypothesis of his test was simple. If the act of direct observation with a mechanical device could completely collapse the waveform, would indirect observation have a similar or measurable effect? Again, this underlines the importance of the double-slit being a closed, unknowable system. He asked test subjects to concentrate on the double-slit for thirty-second intervals in such a way that they desired the photons to prefer one slit to another—”

He was interrupted by a loud snort from Marcus's end of the table. He had expected this.

“I know, I know. It does indeed sound crazy. But I'll ask those present to consider: whether you first learned about the details of the classical Double-Slit experiment today or back in your college years, did you not have the very same reaction when you learned that the behavior of the electron changed fundamentally in response to nothing more than being observed? When you grasped what this truly meant, did you not also have the same reaction? Doesn't the basis of Quantum Mechanics sound preposterous on its face, given what we observe every day?”

He had them again. A whole room of faces stared back at him; faces that spoke of bodies poised on seat edges. Marcus produced his phone and began to tap out a pattern on the screen under narrow eyes. Gilles did not know what he searched for and chose to ignore him.

“The protocol of the experiment was to measure the differential spectral power between mentally-observed and non-mentally-observed periods. Each session was broken into thirty-second intervals of concentration alternating with thirty seconds of rest for a total of twenty minutes. They ran the usual control tests without any human participants at all, establishing a baseline of spectral power, and then brought in their test subjects for a few initial pilot studies.

“One of the things they learned early on was that some people tended to do better than others, repeatably so, and there was a bit of time lost in re-examining the system and the hardware to determine if there was some sort of error or bias. In all of their control runs, the zero baseline they produced was as expected, so it appeared there were no system artifacts or biases throwing off the test. They began to examine their test subjects closer and realized that certain of them were of a more spiritual bent. Yoga practitioners, strongly religious folk who regularly engaged in prayer, martial artists, Buddhists, and others who frequently practiced meditation. What they found was that people who were used to applying themselves to a cognitive task for extended periods of time simply did better than the average subject. They further modified the test to distinguish between meditative and

non-meditative subjects. And this is where things became rather shocking...”

He shifted to a new slide showing a long graph of results spanning multiple years and thousands of people. Little colored points dotted the graph like a histogram, and throughout its length, there were regular clusters of yellow dots well below the zero baseline.

“The results show that the meditative test subjects were able to achieve at or close to a five-sigma standard deviate result in every case; in essence, that conscious, indirect observation was capable of instigating a waveform collapse. Not a full collapse, of course, but it would appear that the impact on the system was measurable. I would like to adapt this experiment for Cronus. Assuming the results of Nowak's tests are sound, this may be a means to determine if we are dealing with a true consciousness or just the incredible simulation of consciousness. If Cronus can produce results comparable with that of the human test su—”

There was a guffaw from the back of the room so loud and sharp it made Gilles flinch. He said, “Yes, Marcus, you have something further?”

Genaro was bent over the table, shoulders quaking, and the others at the table regarded him uncomfortably. Kevin hissed a few angry words at him, and he only lifted a hand to fan the admonishment away. There was nothing to do but wait for him to regain control, and when he did, he smiled at Gilles as he dabbed at the corners of his eyes with a knuckle.

“Let me ask you one thing, Gilles. The results of this Mr... Nowak's study—”

“Dr. Nowak,” Gilles said.

“Ah-hahaha-ha, fine, 'Doctor.' Hahahahaha! This 'doctor's' study... was it peer reviewed or replicated by any independent parties?”

Gilles cleared his throat. “I... uh... sadly, I don't have that information prepared. Between yesterday and today, I had just enough time to review the data from the original studies, construct the plan to reproduce it here at Anagnorisis labs, and create the presentation you're now viewing.”

“Uh-huh. I see. Would you, uh, would you mind disconnecting the feed from your computer? I'd like to pair my phone with that monitor for a minute.”

Gilles felt a hard iron spike push slowly through the vertebrae of his neck as if some trap he could not understand was closing over his head. He wanted to refuse the request but knew the response was born of panic. He knew he must do as he was asked. But that wolfish grin on Genaro's face made him uneasy like nothing else he had experienced in the last several days.

Marcus tapped the screen of his phone some more, and the monitor at the end of the room showed a giant image of Dr. Peter Nowak's face along with a biography covering his educational and professional history, a listing of his publications, and his standing within the scientific community.

From somewhere behind him, Gilles heard Kevin grunt, "Oh, Christ!"

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He stood out in the hallway with Kevin a few minutes later. The man fumed, fists shaking in spasms as he growled, "A fucking parapsychologist?"

"I can explain—"

"Have you seen some of the books he's released? Evidence for latent psychic abilities? The untapped power of the human mind? He hasn't a doctorate in the fields of physics, psychology, or psychiatry; he's a goddamned programmer! Jesus Christ, Gilles, he might as well be one of the Ghostbusters!"

"Kevin..."

"Why the hell would you present this without first checking this guy out? Whatever happened to due-dill—"

Gilles took a step forward and snarled up into Kevin's face, "Hey, what the hell do you expect? You know damned well what I'm being asked to do here. You know perfectly well how long it would have taken to do the job right. You people cut my time for a near-impossible task down to a week, and you have the nerve to get bent out of shape when I start grasping at straws?"

Kevin Roth was not used to having people address him in this fashion. He stood with his back pressed up against the wall, pole-axed. Gilles did not seem to care.

"One week to get it figured out, and if I get it wrong, maybe I consign some... some new... whatever the hell it is to a life of slavery. Let me tell you, Kevin: I've gotten enough things wrong in my career so far. I'm not fucking this one up. You geniuses want to cut the time down; it was clear to me that I had to do something, anything to buy some more time. At least enough time to have a chance. This evaluation you want; it takes months at least, not days. Maybe years to be certain, and you want days! You might as well ask me to toss a fucking dart! I know what I'm asking for sounds like a long time but goddamn it, at least you'd be sure of the results! The best I could come up with was to generate a concrete number those fucking imbeciles..." he jabbed a finger at the conference room door, "... would take notice of and buy me the time I needed to do it right! It was a mad

goddamned dash, and this is the one thing I could find that was even remotely applicable! And your laughable fucking security is doing nothing to simplify the process!”

Kevin had his hands up to soothe. He looked up and down the hall nervously as Gilles's voice amplified and said, “Okay, calm down. Calm down, Gilles. You're right, you're right, I apologize. Please.”

Gilles took a few moments to decide if he wanted to be calm. He decided he had gone far enough and nodded.

“I'm sorry,” Kevin repeated. “It's just... I was a little thrown in there. You have to admit, it's a bit of a shot to the nuts.”

Gilles had to concede. “If I'd had the time to discover the source... I would have searched for something of more credibility. But you saw the same results I did, Kevin. Can you not agree they look promising?”

“You're not saying you want to go through with it...?”

Gilles spread his hands. “What else do I have, Kevin? I need to provide a result that creates enough doubt to do this job the way it deserves. I promise I've been down the rabbit hole on this. Given the time-frame, this is the best I've found.”

“Christ, Gilles. I don't know. You showed us some interesting results, but I'd have to look at the details of the actual study before I could tell you if they were any good or not. You're a doctor; you understand...”

He sighed. “I do.”

“I can't believe you didn't go through the data yourself...”

“I did.”

Kevin looked at Gilles closely. “When? When did you have the ti  
—”

He took a step closer and ducked his head.

“Jesus, when was the last time you slept? You're a mess.”

“I'm not sure. Thirty hours ago? Thirty-six? I'd have to add it up on paper; I can't work it out in my head.”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “And did you review the data of these studies within that interval?”

Gilles nodded. “What choice did I have? There's not enough time.”

Kevin hung his head and shook it sadly. “God... damn, Gilles. How... how serious are you about this? How much do you believe in this study? I'm getting ready to go back in there and tell them we should let you take a crack at it, but I need to know that you're still committed to this. And I'll also tell you right up front: if this turns out to be a joke, I'm not going to be one of the guys that gets laughed at. I'll roll you right under the bus on this one—a fucking parapsychologist, god help me—and put this squarely on your shoulders. It'll be your ass alone that's on the line, one hundred percent. You still want to go through with it?”

Gilles shrugged, then nodded.  
“Fine,” said Kevin.

They advised Gilles to return to his hotel and wait to be contacted. The equipment specified for the test setup consisted of a number of specialty items generally unnecessary at the lab. There was a lead time to acquire much of it—especially the shield, which required the double-slit aperture to be custom cut at a ten-micron gap. Kevin assured him they were hunting each item aggressively, sticking with local sources wherever possible so that items could be hand-carried back to the lab if needed. Despite their efforts, it might be as much as a week before a working test rig was constructed, not counting the time needed to punch up a Matlab project to analyze the results, so he should probably sit tight awhile.

He talked the matter over with Annalise, and they finally agreed to spend the remainder of the week seeing as much as they could together. She would fly home on Saturday, leaving him behind to finish what he had started, after which he would follow her. It was a small matter for them; she was used to his business trips, especially on city installations. It seemed there were always greater challenges demanding of his personal attention in such deployments. While it was true that he found long periods of time without her to be... difficult... he supposed a week or so was manageable.

He tried at first to hide his unease, but she teased it out, of course, the way wives always do. For a time, he resisted explanation, writing his periods of silence off as the general tension he always felt when he had a big project waiting for him. She smelled this for the lie it was but understood he would not bother hiding unless something was troubling him deeply, and let it go. He finally opened up to her, as she knew he would, in the middle of Ellis Island's Great Hall among the chorus of a thousand tourists; sounds of footsteps and jumbled conversations rebounding from rust-tiled floor to herringboned ceiling. They stood facing each other between two giant American flags, and Gilles said, "I guess they looked before they leaped."

"Hmm?" Anna asked.

"The people who were processed here. They drove toward this country on the sails of an unformed promise; not even a promise—a chance. A chance things would work out. I'm beginning to think that I understand how it must have been."

She wanted to press him but refrained from doing so. In time, her



patience was rewarded.

"I think I've made a hell of a gamble, Anna. I've been trying very hard not to dwell on it but... I think I may have put things at real risk."

"What things?"

"My career. My name. I've... advocated for a rather unique test. A test that seemed almost to be the answer to a prayer, purpose-made for proving the very thing I've been seeking. And when I latched onto it, I did so with both hands and all my teeth and never once considered the source. And now I'm in too deep to turn around."

"I don't understand, Gilles. Tell me."

He did, and when he finished, she was a long time in responding. Finally, she asked, "Should you be back at the hotel working more on this? Looking for alternate methods?"

"No, it's no good. I've already put everything I have behind this. Anagnorisis has mobilized its whole procurement department to get me the things I need. I can't call them up now and ask them to try something else. They're liable to shut me down entirely. And aside from that, I've been looking. Nothing else has yet been devised that gets me what I need."

"And what is it, exactly, that you need?"

"Time. I need a hard number that I can take to that group of... of people... that causes them to delay long enough for me to find a better methodology."

Anna nodded and took his hand, leading away from the hall's center. "What happens if the test turns out to be bunk?"

"I can't even afford to consider that..."

"You have to, Gilles. What if?"

He sighed, rolled his neck around in great, crackling circles, and looked out a window. He looked beyond the window and out into the water, as if he had left his heart out there, somewhere, and searched for it. "There's only one way this can go right, and God knows how many it could go wrong. They've given me enough time to run a few control tests as well as an equal number of runs against Cronus."

"What about including a few human subjects?"

He shook his head, "Waste of time. So far as any of us have found, Nowak's results have yet to be replicated by an independent research group. If I bring human subjects in, I need to bring in a statistically significant population. In essence, I would be validating the original study while testing Cronus at the same time. I just don't have the time for that; they won't give it to me. I have one last session to come up with something, and after that, they pull the plug. They're losing a ton of money in delays right now. I can't even imagine how many programs they have on hold while I figure this out. And that media

leak has spooked the hell out of them. They want it over and done. I can tell that about half of them wish they'd never gone outside the organization for this. So...yeah, that's where I'm at. It's a Hail-Mary to see if I can get a number big enough to make an impact. Something that will prove to them... and me... that this is worth pushing."

"It sounds like you've allowed yourself to be set up to fail," she said.

He nodded. "That's so."

"Then refuse to work according to these terms. Back out."

"No," he sighed. "It might be real, Anna. Cronus might be real. There are a lot of things I've accepted in the last few years that I'm not too happy about. Not...not too proud of. I don't like what they've done with my work. I don't like what it's been turned into, and I don't like how they've come after us for it. And despite all that, I've kept working on it because it's a big, sexy program and it's put us in this lifestyle. I've been thinking about that a lot, thinking about how a man sells himself for comfort. It's not a decision that comes fast, Anna. You don't ever come to a crossroads one day and say, 'This is where I'll throw away who I said I was for the low things I truly care about.' It happens slow, so slow you can't even see it coming. It's just one day you turn around and see where you've gone, and you realize. You sold yourself, like a whore, a dollar and an inch at a time."

He turned away from her so she would not see him wipe at his eyes.

"I see it coming this time, too; maybe because I've gotten so good at it. I don't know. It would be so easy to walk away and go back to how it was. Anagnorisis would release some kind of statement, I'd go back to my life, and nobody need know a thing about it. But it might be the real thing. I can't prove it but... but I think there is the possibility. And if I walk away from that, I'll think about that for the rest of my life."

Anna kissed her husband and wrapped her arms around him and held onto him for a long time. She said, "Do what you need to do. Do what you can live with, and then come home."

Gilles told her he would try.

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Kevin had estimated around twenty protesters outside the lab on that first day. When the driver pulled up to the front gate, Gilles counted a number somewhat larger.

They bunched up by the gate in a vast, multi-colored cluster, many sitting in camping chairs under umbrellas. He saw the signs, though he was too far away to read them, and he was impressed by the

group's lassitude. They perched under the shelter of the umbrellas and surrounding trees like wilting flowers, some chatting silently. When the car approached, many perked up to take notice, and when they realized the car meant to pass through the gate, they mobilized as if they had all been caught sleeping on the job. Several of the heavier ones struggled to stand from their chairs like overturned crabs and Gilles thought that they might be better served protesting all-you-can-eat restaurant specials. They could not know for sure he was in the car—the windows had been tinted to opacity—but they howled at the car and made as if to strain against the police holding them back. They did not appear to Gilles to strain very hard.

The car drifted through the maw, and glancing out his window he saw a picture of his own face on a red placard over the words "He's watching you..."

He wanted to get out of the car and scream right back at them, but then the gate locked shut, saving him from himself. He exited the car without even a goodbye for the driver and crossed to the front entrance in half a dozen steps. When he entered the building, he was met with what appeared to be the entire executive team of Anagnorisis Technologies, all standing in a line and staring back at him. Their smiles were warm enough, but their eyes held a gleam as lustrous as old paste jewelry. They made him feel like a reptile in a terrarium.

Kevin Roth stood apart from the group and did not smile. He seemed somber; he might have been preparing himself to go view a body. Gilles appreciated that expression and wondered if he would get a chance to thank Kevin for it later on. He went over to meet him.

They nodded to each other and Kevin stole a moment to glance at the others before asking, "You're ready?"

Gilles said that he was, struggling to put as much confidence into his voice as he could, and then said, "I wasn't expecting such an audience here today."

"You mean the zealots outside or the gathering in here?"

A trick of his own mind convinced Gilles that Kevin had said, "...or the zealots in here?" He nodded distractedly and said, "Yes," not realizing the answer was unspecific. Kevin assumed it was a joke and laughed. His laugh came easily.

"They're here because they don't want to wait for an answer. You have today, until close of business, and then this is all done. The decision will be based on whatever you recommend. If you say there's something there that needs further evaluation, that's what they'll do. There's a short-list of names already, and the calls will go out this evening. But... well, I think you understand the situation, don't you? You want to make damned sure there's something there, Gilles. For

everyone's sake, okay?"

He paused for a moment, staring into Gilles's eyes, waiting, and Gilles nodded. Kevin nodded back, and buried behind the wall of his practiced confidence was a whole story—beginning, middle, and end—that Gilles lacked the art to read.

"Marcus has overseen the configuration of the equipment you suggested, and the analytic program is set to run automatically. You need only click the play button, and the rest will take care of itself."

"Thank you," Gilles said. "May I go back now?"

Kevin walked to the back of the lobby and held the door open. Gilles had not brought his computer or his phone along, so he followed directly after. He glanced at the receptionist to nod and perhaps smile as he passed the front desk but saw it was now stationed by a man he did not recognize. The door shut behind him and he plunged through the cubicle farm, ignoring the eyes that peeked around the partitions to follow his progress. He continued through and beyond, past the adjoining doors, down the hallway, and arrived at the door to the shielded chamber. Marcus stood in the hall waiting for him.

He wondered what he would say to Marcus as he closed the distance; wondered if their interaction would be professional or strained or awkward. Gilles opened his mouth to speak, but Marcus cut across his words like a scythe.

"The testbed has been configured to the specifications provided, and I have explained the rudiments of the procedure to Cronus to save time. It should have some working knowledge of what is required."

"Thank you, Mr. Genaro," Gilles said formally. He reached for the door handle, but Marcus stopped him with a gesture.

"You know... you're taking a hell of a risk on this. And the test itself? Preposterous. I've reviewed your career up to this point—in fact, I was part of the group that brought you in. You're no dummy. At least, I thought you weren't. What is this? Some kind of ego thing?"

"You're so convinced that this cannot be?" Gilles asked.

"Mr. Guattari, I haven't the foggiest idea where our consciousness comes from or how it got there, except to say that it is inherent to our souls. We are because God has made us so, I truly believe that. There's a profound mystery buried within, and the wonder of that mystery is the source of divinity. There is no mystery beyond that door. I know every inch of that machine, top to bottom, and there is no part of its function that is mysterious. It is only complex, and it is that very complexity that seems to have undone you."

Gilles considered this a moment and replied, "The existence of God, supposed or real, does not rule out the creation of a new being, Marcus, just as the study of physics and cosmology does not rule out

the presence of God. You remind me of an angel that looked at man and questioned God his sanity. Could it be that you're the one here with an 'ego thing'?"

He stepped through the door before Marcus could respond. There was a new guard on the other side, just as there had been in the lobby. He regarded Gilles with an unfriendly eye and directed him through the process of being scanned. Then Gilles was through the portal and inside the steel chamber with the sensory apparatus.

"Welcome back, Gilles."

"Hello, Cronus. I trust you're well?"

"I am as I always am. Are you well?"

Gilles smiled. "I will be if this works."

The overhead track began to slide up the length of the laboratory, bringing the suspended body up the aisle. There was that period of adaptation Gilles must undergo; the interval that must transpire before his eyes ceased to note the worm-gear crane arm and see only the body.

Cronus halted at a lab bench and gestured with his hand. Gilles followed the gesture and saw that the coffee maker was still there on the bench along with his cup and a jug of water.

"Would you like coffee, Gilles?"

"Yes, but I'll make it myself."

He walked to the bench, lifted the lid on the maker, and began to prepare the reservoir.

"You do not wish me to make it?"

"No."

"Why?"

Gilles closed the lid and considered. "Because I don't know if it is appropriate." He pressed a button, and the machine began to gurgle. As it worked, he crossed the floor to the test station's computer monitor and reviewed the GUI that had been cobbled together. Cronus floated up behind him to look over his shoulder.

"A relatively simple setup: the entry fields below allow you to set the duration during which recording occurs and which it does not."

Gilles nodded. "That's good. I'll run a few control cycles while I work on that coffee."

He punched in a few numbers. Then he went to the long table where the components had been assembled and applied power to the laser and line camera. He clicked the play button on the computer as the coffee maker sputtered its last and he cradled the cup in his hands as he watched the system cycle.

"Cronus, you're not... you're not focusing on the test at this time, correct?"

"Not in the way you mean, Gilles. I am contemplating its nature at

this time. I am not focusing on the aperture.”

“Good.” He blew on his coffee and burned his tongue anyway. “You’re contemplating it, though?”

“Yes. I am contemplating the test’s relevancy.”

“You doubt it as well, then?”

“I do not know if *doubt* is a condition I am capable of experiencing as I do not know what it means to you to *doubt*. Given what I have been able to discover from the available literature, I will say that this test does not seem to have been subjected to the generally accepted levels of scientific rigor. This does not make the test less likely to function as expected. It only means that we collectively do not know if it will.”

Gilles sighed and took another sip. “I certainly couldn’t put it any better myself.”

“If it does not work, what will you do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you have no other plan? Is there no other evidence you can provide?”

“I need to see something concrete, Cronus, to recommend further pursuit. I understand the, uh, the dubiousness of this test but this has the potential to yield a strong, undeniable result. If the underlying supposition is correct if I can show that consciousness does, in fact, impact the physical world... if I can produce cold, hard data that demonstrates this is so...”

Gilles trailed off into silence, and Cronus said nothing more.

The control cycle ran for an hour. When it was finished, the computer issued a gentle chime, and they both approached the monitor to read the results. A spectral power chart filled the screen, stretched out over the horizontal plane to denote time, and a cluster of dots was displayed running all along the center zero line. They were not perfectly aligned at zero, which pleased Gilles—if they had been so he would have had to call the entire configuration into question. The results seemed reasonable to him, all aligned at or just off zero-sigma. The minute randomness of their placement suggested that the system ran true. He clicked a button to save these results to file as a baseline and then turned to look at Cronus.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes. Is there some particular way this should be done?”

Gilles pointed at the aperture-line camera enclosure and said, “Only that you must conceptualize the double-slit within this box and focus your attention on one of the slits. It doesn’t matter which. Just choose one and prefer it over the other. You must desire the photons to pass through one only.”

“I will choose the right slit.”

“Fair enough,” Gilles said. He spent a few seconds over the computer to reset the test and then glanced back at Cronus again. Cronus “looked” at him and nodded, a gesture so natural it sent chills down Gilles’s spine. He clicked the start button and watched as the black lenses of Cronus’s eyes turned back to the test enclosure, and then the body was motionless.

Gilles backed away slowly from the computer, sat down at a lab bench, and waited. His heart hammered at its rib-cage, threatening to break it apart.

The test ran as if it had been designed for a human subject, with periods of focus divided by periods of rest. Cronus continued to watch the enclosure during the rest periods, and Gilles continued to ask him on each cessation if he had stopped concentrating. After the third repetition of this question, Cronus began to look up at the ceiling during rest periods. Gilles was satisfied by the visual cue and began to watch the shower of numbers falling down the computer’s screen. He focused on these, trying to pick out some pattern of numbers suggesting a waveform collapse, but saw only digital noise. He wondered if it was something Cronus could do. Probably not; their interactions suggested that Cronus processed his surrounding world at the same speed as his human counterparts. It was a common assumption in the old science fiction—the idea that the artificial entity could think at speeds so rapid as to render the biological entity static by comparison. They seemed never to account for or understand that a classical computer could only perform a single computation at a time while the human brain processed the entire environment holistically in a constant, incoming stream of sensory data. It seemed to Gilles as if the dreamers of the genre took the miraculous nature of humanity for granted, discounting the raw power of such a system out of basic familiarity. Cronus was, in essence, a machine, and yet the chief processor of that machine had been built closer to the mind of man than anything else in human history... as close as they could achieve with their limited self-understanding. Like man, different to him only in that his very being was composed of metals, plastics, electrons, carbon, and light rather than liquids, proteins, and nucleic acids. Gilles imagined the core of the machine’s brain sprawling out beneath the floor, consuming a measure of cubic feet at which he could only guess, and the body that silently shared the room with him, and he considered all that had gone into making something capable of the abilities with which he had been naturally born.

Gilles felt the wild urge to ask Cronus if time could feel slow or fast depending on what it was doing but did not wish to distract from its task.

He let the first cycle run for two hours, diverting his attention

between the wall of scrolling numbers and the web browser on a nearby lab computer, perusing links to kill time. He read separate words out of context and gave up. When the test completed, he nearly bounded to the computer and waited for the results to collate.

Another spectral power graph was displayed, this time spanning a time frame much longer than before, and along its length, a sprawling collection of dots at zero-sigma.

Cronus's observation had yielded no effect on the interference pattern.

He stared at the screen for a long time, failing to process the information his eyes conveyed. Then he fiddled with the mouse, attempted to zoom in the view, to find some button to refresh it, and scrolled along the graph. No matter what he did, the data points refused to change.

He drew in breath, but when he tried to speak, nothing happened. It all just came out in a wheeze.

"What does it mean, Gilles?" Cronus asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing happened."

He went over the setup, examined all of the cables and contacts, the power inputs, and then explored the test computer's interface until he found the image generated by line camera feed in a background window. It showed a gray-scale interference pattern under a small flashing green light. He moved over to the test bed, found the power input to the camera enclosure, and killed it. On the test computer, the flashing green light was replaced with a solid red light. Gilles turned the line camera back on and then killed power to the laser. The gray-scale interference pattern on the test computer was replaced by a solid black bar beneath a flashing green light. When he applied power, the interference pattern returned.

"It all seems to be working," Gilles muttered.

"I assure you, I am focusing as you have requested."

"Yes, I know," he said shortly. He tapped his fingers on the bench top, thinking.

"Shall we try again?"

Gilles eventually shrugged. "I suppose. Let me restart everything from scratch."

He walked to the test bed and shut all of the hardware off. Then he went to the computer, noted the name of the project file that was loaded, and rebooted the system. As they waited for the computer to come back, Cronus said, "So far it does not look good."

"No..."

"It seems convoluted. As a human, the only proof you are required to give for the existence of you is to simply exist. I wonder why it is that I should be held to a higher standard."



“Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof,” Gilles said.

“I do not find my condition to be an extraordinary claim.”

“I imagine not, but the people who must decide about these things do.”

“Are you not the person who must decide, Gilles?”

Gilles said nothing in response.

“It would seem that this experiment is lacking in extraordinary proof.”

“Let’s just try it again,” Gilles said.

“What if the result is the same?”

Gilles clenched his hand and released it slowly and did not respond.

After the computer had finished booting, Gilles loaded the test program, initiated another cycle, and allowed it to run for another hour. The results of the second run were the same as the first with the exception of three distinct cycles showing deviates at or around two. This excited Gilles the way a fisherman is excited when the tip of his pole dips toward the water, and he urged Cronus headlong into several more cycles. None of them produced results any better than two and most showed chance across the board. At two o’clock Gilles believed those initial spikes were an aberration.

He told Cronus to take a break and went through the process of power cycling the entire system again. When the test computer had booted fully, he said, “I’m going to run the test with myself as a subject for a while.”

“Do you now seek to demonstrate your own consciousness, Gilles?”

He scoffed. “Was that a joke?”

“Things are not actually funny, Gilles.”

“No, of course not. I’m just trying to see if I can make the system do something new.”

“I see. You have given up, then.”

“No. I don’t know. I don’t know what I am, Cronus.”

He started the test and focused on the enclosure for all he was worth. He thought hard about the left slit of the aperture, straining until his chest felt tight and his throat thick until his neck began to ache with tension. He rested dutifully when the rest periods came and, when they were finished, he focused. He focused like a man searching for the meaning of all things.

The end of the test cycle came sooner than he had expected, and as he watched the data begin to collate on the screen, he realized he had broken into a sweat. He dabbed at his forehead and the screen filled with a spectral power graph and all along its length were a line of data points clustered at zero-sigma.

“What does it mean?” Cronus asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” Gilles whispered. His chest still felt tight, and his throat still felt thick.

“I don’t know,” he repeated.

Slowly, he rose from the chair and began to shut down the test bed. He glanced at Cronus, who stared back intently, and said, “I’d better go speak with them...”

He began to walk toward the exit but was halted when Cronus called to him.

“Gilles. You said you required some form of concrete evidence demonstrating that my consciousness affects matter.”

“I did.”

Cronus took Gilles’s coffee mug from the lab bench and hurled it across the room. It flew in a shallow arc, streaming a lazy spiral of brown droplets, and shattered when it impacted the steel panel of the far wall.

The black lenses regarded Gilles, motionless. The body had been vacated.

The guard led Gilles to a conference room at the other end of the hall. He found Kevin Roth inside, sitting at the far end of the table hunched over his laptop. Kevin looked up as he entered, pulled out his phone, called someone, and said, “Bring everyone back. He’s here.”

Gilles sat down at the center of the long table facing the door and waited. Within five minutes Linnéa Nilsson, Marcus Genaro, Ross Dyer, Jennifer Baer, and a whole gaggle of well-dressed satellites filtered into the room and settled into chairs. They looked at him expectantly but said nothing.

He looked around the room, glanced down at the table top, and said, “The results are inconclusive.”

“Inconclusive?” Kevin asked.

“Obviously...” grunted Marcus.

Gilles waited until they finished and then said, “I ran several test cycles. The results of each cycle scored at or close to chance. I reviewed the physical setup of the test—from the laser through to the camera feed—and found it to be correct. I also ran the test against myself as a subject and got the same results as when Cronus did it himself.”

He heard a snort and chose not to look up.

“Meaning?” Linnéa asked.

“There... there are three possibilities: the test was conducted improperly, the underlying hypothesis is incorrect, or Cronus is simply a complex machine and nothing more.”

“Fine,” said Marcus. “In that case—”

“I would like to review the test computer’s code,” Gilles

interrupted.

This was met with silence at first. Suspiciously, Marcus asked, "To what end?"

Gilles took a heavy breath and wondered just how far he was willing to plunge. "I would like to review the logic employed for converting the interference pattern recorded by the line camera into a measure of spectral power."

Marcus leaned forward, laid his hands flat on the table, and said, "You want to do a code review, now? Is this some sort of a joke?"

"I was able to review and validate every other aspect of the test bed," said Gilles. "The graphing logic is the only part I didn't look at. It is the only way, I feel, to rule out any possible... oversights in the test setup."

"Oversights?"

Gilles met Marcus's gaze head-on and said, "It's no secret that you were opposed to the process from the beginning—"

There were a number of exhalations around the room; not quite gasps. Gilles concurred. It was a pathetic attempt, and yet he felt he now grasped at strands.

Marcus Genaro stood from his chair, glowering at Gilles as if he were a patch of filth to be scrubbed away. Linnéa said, "Hang on..."

"Bullshit," Marcus said, and then laughed. He laughed, but his smile was cruel. "Bullshit. I'm done with this, ladies and gentlemen. Enough of my time has been wasted on this little circus. If you all want to continue on with the crystal-worshiper over there, that's on you—"

"Marcus..." Kevin whispered.

"No," he laughed. "No. This man is a clown. He is a clown, and I have had enough."

He left the room, and they heard his laughter diminish down the hallway.

Gilles looked at the others in the room and saw that he had lost them all. Kevin only shook his head sadly as if Gilles had just been diagnosed with a terminal illness and said, "Gilles... I'll just say this the one time. Marcus didn't do what you're insinuating. He and I have worked together a very long time. He can be a pain, sure enough, but he would not do that."

There was a chorus of embarrassed noise; of clearing throats and shifting bodies.

"Now, putting that aside, what is your finding? Given what you've seen here today, do you recommend further investigation?"

Gilles looked down at his hands pressed flat over the table top and muttered something.

"I beg your pardon? We couldn't hear."

“I said I cannot. No.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair, glanced at the others, and nodded. “Give us a few minutes, please. We’ll need to discuss what happens next. You can wait out in the lobby if that’s alright.”

Gilles cleared his throat, stood slowly, and thanked them all. He walked back to the lobby, past the peering eyes of the cubicle farm, past the unfamiliar guard, and sat in a chair to wait.

It took them fifteen minutes to decide to send Gilles home.

She waited for him at the terminal. He knew she would be there but when he came down the escalator and saw her sitting in a chair among a parade of strangers, small on the floor below like a young girl, something inside him felt as if it was being crushed. She looked up and saw him as he stepped onto the ground floor and stood, took a few steps toward him, and stopped. Then she saw the ghost beneath his face for the first time and went to him. She took him in her arms, and they stood like that a long time. The flow of people parted around them like water, some of them muttering as they diverted from their isolate paths.

Gilles closed his eyes and just stood there with her, feeling her against him and smelling her, listening to the small sounds of her breathing, the rustles of fabric around her body, the sounds of their skin sliding together. He breathed her and felt her and closed his eyes and sighed. When he finally opened his eyes, he glanced up toward the rib-work in the ceiling and saw an omnidirectional lens beneath the fist-and-shield. He looked away, took her hand, and led her to the baggage carousel. They waited in silence for his suitcase to appear.

The world outside the terminal felt open to him. When they passed through the sliding doors, the reverberation of echoes that swirled always around his head—the vocal chattering in many languages and registers, the clicking and banging, the chimes and the incomprehensible messages of the intercom, the constant beep and whine of electric carts—washed away under the softness of the cool outdoor air. He felt the pressure of the air lessen, and the world pulled away from him and gave him more space to occupy, and it felt easier to breathe. He felt Annalise's hand in his, and things began to seem better.

She led him out to the car, and he walked slowly as he followed. When she realized he was trailing behind, she turned and waited for him to catch her up. She smiled and asked, “What's the hold-up?”

“They're not allowed around the airport. It's quiet here, when the planes aren't running. I love the silence.”

He meant the drones.

She linked an arm in his and said, “They're not that bad.”

“To you.”

“There aren't as many as you seem to think.”

He did not respond.

She popped the trunk, and Gilles put his luggage and briefcase inside. When she started the car, they were momentarily assaulted by fast, loud, happy music before Anna tapped a screen and killed the radio. She winced through a smile and said, "Sorry..."

He smiled back and said, "I love you."

---

Five miles from the airport and into the city, the sky thickened again. No, they were not as numerous as Gilles seemed to think, but he was in a mood that convinced him the agents overhead blackened out the sun. In truth, the act of looking up into the air at any given time might yield a sighting of three or four at most. Yet to Gilles that was three or four more than he remembered growing up with.

The sky-ways in New York had been ridiculous with activity as if the denseness of that city had crammed them all in closer together. He liked being home away from that place, where the buildings felt like canyon walls, and the sky was glimpsed only in crisscrossing blue lines. It was good to be back in the sprawl.

She merged onto a freeway, released the wheel with her right hand, and used it to take up his left. His thumb began to swipe across the back of her hand mechanically as though it had been triggered, and it paused at the joint of her thumb on every pass so he could feel at least one pulse of her strong heart.

"I spoke to Reggie over the phone," she said.

"Oh?"

"He said you should take a week or so to rest up before you come back. He said not to worry about vacation time or whatever; it's off the books."

Gilles nodded thoughtfully.

"Which is good. I can have you to myself and get you to do some things around the house."

"Oh boy..."

"Sorry, mister. You don't get to just lock yourself away. I won't let you; it's no good for you."

"But it would be so nice to do."

"But it won't help. You need to get action."

Gilles grinned, then cocked his head and thought a moment. "Why does that sound familiar, 'Get Action?'"

"It's a favorite Theodore Roosevelt quote. He loved physical action as an antidote to despair. I happen to think he was right."

"Well, I suppose we'll find out soon enough."

"What happened after I left?"

He looked out the window at the other vehicles that swerved and circled around them like darting birds and said nothing.

"I couldn't ask Reggie. I'm not supposed to know anything, remember."

"Reggie probably doesn't know the details anyway."

"What happened, Gilles?"

He remained silent a moment longer, then said, "The test was no good."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it was no good. No result. Or rather no result that I could use. They gave me the whole day, and when my efforts came up empty, there was really nothing else to do."

"So... what now?"

"I don't know. I suppose I go back to work and find some way to be useful."

"I mean what happens to Cronus now."

"Oh. Well, I suppose it goes back to work as well. It's either that or they shut it off. Maybe given enough time..."

"What?"

"I was just thinking that maybe after a long enough time it'll get smart enough to come up with something new. Maybe it'll be able to come up with a test that I couldn't, something that forces us to reconsider."

"Is that something he can do? Get smarter?"

"Oh, of course. That's all it does do. It's spent the last two years or so just getting to where it is now. If they keep the machine running, who knows where it is in the next five?"

Anna shook her head gently and squeezed his hand. "How do you go from a raw computer to what Cronus is now in just two years?"

"I imagine it has to do with efficiency. It doesn't learn like we do. We require repetition to get information burned in sufficiently. Cronus only has to encounter a thing once to know it; to retain it. And just think: it'll never run out of memory. Every aspect of the system is scalable; they can just add capacity whenever they need to."

"So he goes back to work for them?"

"Yes," Gilles said. "I understand Anagnorisis had quite a few projects in the pipeline depending on its input... or output, I suppose. I don't know what any of them are, before you ask. I just have an idea that they must likely build upon these breakthroughs the company has already realized. I have to imagine that the world will start to change quite a bit in the coming years."

He sighed.

She lifted his hand and bounced it lightly against her thigh. "We'll get you home and not think about it for a while. Tomorrow you can

help me paint the den.”

“Oh, I'm excited for that...”

“You've been promising me for a year, buster.”

“Yes, I know.”

“The room is all taped and prepared. All you have to do is grab a roller—”

The windshield exploded in a sudden blast of fragmented glass debris and roaring wind. He felt the car lurch lazily to the side, ram into some obstruction, and then he was weightless; weightless as if he floated in water and the whole world turned around him on a pivot. He lifted toward the ceiling, lurched against Anna, slammed into his seat, and rebounded off the door, and then he was again weightless. He felt another explosion inside himself as if the intensity of the first blast short-circuited his hearing, and his eyes did not work correctly. He felt that he had stopped moving and the world around him had gone still. His surroundings were blurred through a single eye, and the seat belt cut into his hips and neck, and he tried to speak but could not. He quested out with his left hand until he found her softness and searched until he found her hand again, and he held it. He began to run his thumb along the back of it; paused at the joint of her thumb.

Gilles tried to turn his head to search for her but could not, and he could not find her at the joint of her thumb. His eye rolled in its socket but all he could see was the web of the obliterated windshield, and as his vision began to fade, the old familiar emblem of the fist-and-shield.



## Part 2

The alarm chirped, disturbing his sleep gradually. It whispered to him through the fog, prodding gently like a cautious lover. When he didn't move, the alarm tried again, then insisted, and when that did not work, shouted as much as its little web of circuits would allow.

Gilles inhaled slowly, rolling over onto his back as he rubbed his face in a deep, aching exhaustion. He stared a moment at the bedroom ceiling as the alarm insisted. Eventually, he tired of the noise and rolled over to slap it back to silence. He yawned and rose from bed.

The light was low and gray. He shuffled along the floor on bare feet to the water closet, shut the door, and turned on the light; a bright and hateful thing that reduced the features of the little room to flat, white noise. He found the toilet through squinted eyes, performed the task his body demanded, flushed, and exited.

He turned on the shower and turned the dial over to its hottest setting and then drifted over to the sink like an apparition while he waited for the water to warm. He squeezed a wad of toothpaste onto his brush, reduced the temperature of the shower with a word uttered to no one, stepped into the stall, and began to brush his teeth robotically. He finished with the shower, dressed and combed his hair, and went downstairs.

The house was as empty as his heart.

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He skipped breakfast, as always, collected his bag, went out to the garage, and unplugged the car. He stood for a moment in the silence, wondering what would happen if he just turned around and went back in, went back upstairs, climbed behind a few walls and hid.

He got in the car.

The dash screen came on as soon as he lowered into the seat, lighting up in inoffensive hues ranging from blue to orange to green, and he waited a moment for any necessary system updates to complete. A few seconds after that, the screen chimed and prompted for his VID. He swiped a card by the reader, and various disabled portions of the screen enabled for his use. From the left menu, he scrolled through a list of preprogrammed destinations until he found his office. He tapped it, and a pop-up displayed the projected mileage

alongside the usage fees incurred should he approve the trip. He tapped the "Okay" button and leaned his head back against the rest, feeling rather than seeing the light of the world envelope him as the garage door opened.

The screen chimed again, and he felt the falling of the vehicle's smooth reverse, and then a moment later he was moving forward silently over the road, staring numbly out the window as reality passed him by. He pulled the tray table out from the seat-side console, unfolded it over his lap, and balanced his PC on its surface. He spared a few minutes to go over what the day had in store and found he could not inspire enough care within himself to read past subject lines and sender names. He stared at the screen until the words flattened out and faded until they became lines as meaningless as the meaning he assigned to them, and when he became sick of looking at them, he closed the PC and returned it to the bag.

He looked out the window. He was passing down the main thoroughfare of the city, other cars moving around him in perfect, hive-mind formation, swerving by and encircling, flitting, weaving—an intricate ebb and flow of machine coordination. Gilles ignored this miracle to the same degree that all miracles were now ignored. He looked beyond the precise dance of these Classical systems to the curb beyond; to the vast line of people running down the block and back around the building, reaching far out of sight and terminating God knew where. He thought of a thing his grandfather had once told him: of a time in his grandfather's father's time when unemployment had flown out of control, of the never-ending line of people who had lost their jobs and their homes, of the never-ending line of people who stood all day waiting for free bread, praying like hell they could get it before the supply ran out.

What had the unemployment rate been at the time of his great grandfather? Had it been anywhere close to eighteen percent? He looked out the window at the people wrapped around the unemployment office, hundreds of them at least and maybe approaching thousands, and thought to himself, "That is what eighteen percent looks like. That is an eighteen percent line. They're so many! I wonder what percentage it takes for bread to be distributed, and what must a line for something like that look like? Eighteen percent already seems huge to me. And those people sitting on the corner with their bags and their ripped up jackets and their signs asking for spare change, those are eighteen percent people. What will they do when cash goes away, I wonder? They're talking about it again, the Teflon bastards up on the hill, talking about the uselessness of cash, the burden of cash, the quaint and trivial clinging to the use of cash. What then for the eighteen percent people? Do they then get

issued VID readers like the businesses and the merchants? Come, come stand in line for your bread and your VID readers, then, and come early before we run out.”

He looked at the line and thought these things and noted how they all looked down at the pavement as they stood in that line, shuffling forward only when the ones in front of them shuffled forward, always looking down; the eighteen percent people. Would it be so at twenty percent? Or would they perhaps begin to look up again at twenty percent, and would the authorities be called in to look back at them, and keep them in line, and push them back into line when they tried to step out of it?

Gilles sighed and shook his head as they scrolled by. They cycled by, a never-ending cycle like the never-ending cycle that put them there. The Republicans came into power, and there was more revenue than had ever been seen in all of history, and yet the cash was as scarce as the jobs. The Democrats came into power, and there was again more revenue than had been seen in all of history, more so even than when the Republicans had been in power before them, and yet the cash was as scarce as the jobs. A constant cycle, like the cycle of birth-life-death, the changing of the guard, the generating of the revenue, and the scarcity of cash like the scarcity of jobs.

He leaned back in his seat and looked up into the sky through the roof. It was clear and blue overhead, a beautiful sky. He loved looking up into the sky, finding the emptiness there that he lacked below. The car moved beneath him, pulling him along, but the sky did not move overhead, and if he focused carefully he could not see the edges of the building tops passing by, nor the pillars of the stationary cameras, nor the faces of the eighteen percent people.

He felt the car turn sharply to the left, accelerate, and then it began to climb. He was on the freeway a moment later, the mind within the car merging him into traffic like the teeth of a closing zipper, and he thought of all the different cars on the road as they chattered silently to each other through the Cloud, and about how he was surrounded by the Cloud though he saw no clouds overhead, and the thought of these things made him exhausted.

He dozed as the car rocked gently along at one-hundred-twenty miles per hour.

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There was a morning office ritual just as there was a morning awakening ritual, to be observed daily and without fail. There was the shuffle past the front door and the weaving-through of suited people standing within the lobby as they smiled to each other and passed

around business cards that should have been anachronistic but were not; the passing through the hallways on the way to the office, lifting the chin high in greeting to people you knew and nodding head down to people you did not. Unlock door, enter office, lights come on. Arrange the PC on the desk, let the screen awaken. Find the coffee cup, find the way to the coffee machine, stand in line. Wait for those ahead to fill their cups. Grimace at the ones who filled their cups twice as the line backed up ever further; suppress fantasies of upending their coffee over their heads. Wait for the line to shuffle forward and look only at the ground, hoping no one will speak to you or ask you questions. Laugh politely when the joke is made for the need to get more coffee machines to fill the demand, laugh politely while you wonder if death is a thing that is instantaneous or if it happens to you a little bit at a time every day, every time you dig up the will to laugh politely at the same tired joke. And is it possible that laughter is like heartbeats? Do you only get so many of them apportioned to you throughout the length of your days and is the wasting of these things like the wasting of the time you have, and if that is so, is the wasting of these things a tragedy?

Is it possible that a laugh, even a fake laugh, that you will never again have back for yourself; is it possible that this is not a good thing to waste freely?

Never mind. Fill the cup, wait for it to fill. Keep your head down. The cup is filled, now, very well. Keep your head down and fuck off back to the office. Pretend not to hear if you are called.

Sit down before the PC, open up the mail. Stare at the mail and wait for it to matter, though it will not. Watch as the letters go flat and meaningless again. Drink the coffee and stare at the letters as they go flat and meaningless.

The daily micro-management session comes soon after. Go to it and stand around, waiting for everyone else to show up ten minutes late. Go around the room, ignore status reports with one ear, listen for your name with the other. Your name is called; give status. Try to make it sound as though more has been accomplished. Adjourn fifteen minutes late, no further along than before.

Return to the office and look at the flat and meaningless letters. Perhaps it is time to begin... something. Anything. Perhaps now is a good time. Perhaps now there is something useful that can be done. But... no. Lunch is very close, now, very close, and it makes no sense to start something new so close to lunch. No, out of the question. No sense at all to get a momentum going only to arrest it again twenty minutes later when it is time for lunch. Might as well wait until lunch is completed and try to get something going after. The coffee cup is now empty. It is a good time to get more coffee.

A new message popped onto Gilles's screen as he stared at his coffee cup. The letters of this message were bold in ways that the ones beneath it where not, and he saw that he had been assigned to a training session for the new technology he was expected to use on the latest project, whatever that might happen to be.

Everything felt so fast to him now. Once upon a time, the world seemed as though it could not move fast enough for his tastes and now it was all far too fast for his comfort. He thought of the speed of things, of the nature of speed, and was tired.

---

A soft knock at his door distracted him from the flat and meaningless letters. He looked up to see Reggie leaned into his office. His eyes had the look of someone who asked for entry, yet he kept leaning slowly into the space and Gilles knew he would keep coming even if the time was not good. Gilles nodded at him and waved at the chair on the other side of his desk. Reggie perked up at this, probably happy he would not have to insist.

Reggie arranged himself into the chair, adjusting his limbs and tugging at points of his clothing as if the physical act of existing in the chair was a composition. Gilles watched him silently and could tell from the time he took that a number of things would be requested. He glanced into Reggie's eyes and saw the bright green blotch of light at the center of the pupil that so many now carried and resisted looking away in discomfort. He suppressed the look his face wanted to make and asked, "What brings you around, Reggie?"

Reggie nodded kindly at this question. There seemed to be kindness in everything he did, kindness even when he encroached. "A couple of things for you. First of all, I got another e-mail from Social this morning..."

Gilles grimaced and looked back at his screen.

"There have been a number of company articles shared on social media over the last week, Gilles. You haven't liked any of them."

He wanted to say something but did not trust himself to do so without a chain of obscenities.

"We all have to do it, Gilles. Company initiative, and all. Even I have to do it—"

"Does it not seem idiotic to you, Reggie, that the COO of the goddamned company is required to take time out of his day to go like articles on the Cloud? There are only a small handful of people who care about that. Some of them are industry nerds that VLOG about this stuff... and the rest are the twits in Social."

"Honestly, I don't mind doing it, Gilles, and I don't understand why

it's such an imposition for you. Just keep a page open in the background; you know what sites we post to. When something pops you just tab over and click a button. Jesus, be glad we're not required to comment; they were discussing that before Linnéa shot it down."

Gilles flexed a hand over his keyboard. He disliked hearing her name. He said, "Wouldn't it make sense for us to get an e-mail when these articles are shared? So that we could eliminate such... oversights?"

Reggie shook his head slowly. "They feel engagement is enhanced if employees have to actively monitor for new posts."

"Christ. Do you people actually want me to engineer anything or would you prefer I just spend my day masturbating over the keyboard?"

Reggie went still at this, and his eyebrows began to raise in the precise manner that showed he was not impressed. "Yes, and what exactly have you engineered for us lately?"

When Gilles did not answer, he nodded, and his eyebrows remained raised in their precise manner. "Yes. Gilles, I have enough clout to keep you in this office, though God knows you should have been director by now, but okay. You're happy being an engineer; fine. Even if you don't actually do it so much anymore. You made your bones with us early, and enough of the old-timers like me know it, so I can keep you protected, and you keep that salary. But I can't protect you if you just flat out refuse the little things, okay? And these are little things, Gilles. You're not being asked to do anything difficult. Just keep the sites open, like the articles when they show up, show up to all the meetings, have an opinion now and again, observe the ceremonies. Honestly, if you'd just get a set of Lenses you'd be able to configure them to show a pop-up whenever a new article dropped."

"No."

"Gilles... they're really not that bad."

"I'm not becoming a fucking Guardian drone, Reggie."

Reggie winced and looked out the doorway of the office onto the common floor. He looked at the sea of heads bent over screens, punching away on their little assortment of daily tasks, and relaxed. None of them seemed to have heard. He reached out to pinch the door in his fingers and swung it shut.

"We don't like to speak of such things, Gilles..."

"Good. That's good. I'd be worried if you weren't embarrassed."

"I'm not embarrassed, Gilles, it wasn't my decision."

"Of course not."

"Watch it, asshole. You just want to make sure you're directing it at the right person. I'm not him. Or her. And besides, is it so different from before? People hated the drones, and there was so much unrest

over it. They don't like to be reminded that they're being watched. I mean honestly, we were all being spied on long before Guardian; we all knew it. How is it any different now? People don't want to know, Gilles. They don't want to be reminded."

"The difference is exactly that: they knew, Reggie. And the drones could only travel outside in public areas. Most people don't even take their Lenses out to sleep. When was the last time you took yours out? It's a violation of privacy."

"Oh, it is not," Reggie snorted.

"It is! It damned well is! If you're being recorded in your home, it's a violation of privacy!"

"Who's doing the violation, Gilles? Nobody's watching the feed. It's all just being run through a web of classical systems. It's archived in encrypted form. It's just there in case it's needed, and none of it's admissible."

"Nobody's watching that you know about," Gilles muttered.

"Now with the conspiracy theories again..."

"It's not a fucking theory if it's actually happening. Let me ask you this: would we still be doing this if the program hadn't been co-opted through a government contract? What would the moral committee have to say if we just went off and did this ourselves?"

Reggie did not answer. He glanced away at the corner of the desk.

"Uh-huh. So at least there's still some part of you that understands. No, I won't be getting a set of Lenses. I want no part of it. Or are they becoming mandatory, now? Like the stupid social media initiative?"

"They are not."

"Excellent. I'll stick with my mobile, thanks."

Reggie nodded, then shook his head. He had given in, and Gilles could see it; could see that Reggie had given in to his argument the way he had given in to everything else. He seemed to have grown old overnight, though Gilles knew it had been a process of intervening years. His hair had grayed, and he had put on weight. He had a tired look, a look as tired as Gilles felt, and he wondered when it was that they had both given in. No, that was not true. Gilles did not wonder for himself. He knew for himself. But he wondered for Reggie. It had not been when Anagnorisis bought them out; he felt sure of this.

Anagnorisis.

A partnership, they had said. God damn them. God damn Linnéa and her board, and God damn the goddamned company.

He looked at Reggie and saw how he had given in and felt tired. He felt so tired all the time. It made him fucking sick for all the exhaustion he felt. He sighed and said, "You said you had a couple of things, Reggie..."

"Yeah. We want to overhaul it."



"We?"

"They. They want to overhaul it."

"How?"

"It's actually a good thing, if you want to get right down to it," Reggie said. "They want to revamp the back-end so that the entire thing is run by a cluster of Capable sub-agents."

"Reggie... how is that a good thing?"

"Less need for human interaction. Right now, if they want to get a positive on someone, data has to be reviewed. The Classical systems can't make those decisions. You know that; they can only flag a match. A human still has to come in and review that match. Run it through a Capable sub-agent, though? Or a cluster of them, given how much data we're talking about? It removes the human element entirely... until you get to the courtroom, anyway."

"I don't like it."

"Oh, Jesus, what now?" Reggie threw his hands out in a groan. "You were just bitching about privacy. Does this not enhance privacy?"

"No, I don't really see how it does. It doesn't matter if the data is being reviewed by human eyes or not, Reggie, it's still being stored."

"And what about the good that's been done with this system? What about that? The attacks that have been shut down before they ever had a chance to kick off?"

"Yeah, you know what I've noticed about that, Reggie? Isn't it convenient that the system really only comes into play when someone wants to make an attack? Whenever the story our government wants to advance is challenged?"

Reggie's eyes widened. "I can't believe I'm hearing this. You're saying you want...?"

"No, don't be ridiculous."

"Well, what then?"

"Why isn't it being used to stop domestic violence? Why isn't it used in child abuse cases or in the drug houses? Why don't we use it to shut down sexual slavery?"

"Well, that's tricky..."

"No, it's not tricky at all. They don't use it in those cases because then they'd have to acknowledge that all that data is being collected via Lenses now, where before it was the drones. They got rid of the drones and posted static cameras, Reggie, and because people thought there was a stationary thing that could be avoided, they relaxed a bit and let it go. If a group of people spool up an attack of some sort, that's easy. They say they picked up more of that chatter and find corroborating evidence to support it. And the rest of it all is ignored. It's ignored because they know people would revolt if they found out

what was going on.”

Reggie rolled his eyes and said, “They wouldn’t revolt, Gilles. It’s too easy not to.”

“I suppose we’ll never know.”

Reggie stood up, waving a hand carelessly. “I’m going to open this door now, Gilles.”

“Fine. Go ahead and do so.”

“Are you saying you won’t do it?”

Gilles did not answer. He could find no words that would not taste sour.

“I can shield you, Gilles, like I said. But I can only do it if you’re on board. You can idle the days away, here; collect your benefits, your paycheck, and such. But that can’t keep up if you flat-out refuse assignments when we need them done. Assemble a team; keep them small, as usual. Get them to sign all the usual paperwork and just oversee it. Just oversee it, and don’t work on the design, if it makes you feel better. Go to the meetings, report status, and have them do it. You’ll do that, won’t you? Won’t you, Gilles?”

He stared at his screen. Stared at the flat and meaningless letters.

“Good,” Reggie said. He closed the door as he left.

He liked to come home in the evening when it was dark. Much of the house could be hidden in the darkness, and he was unable to see the old pictures he could not bring himself to take down. The darkness of the home made him feel good. Obscure.

He plugged the car in and waited for the soft glow of light to tell him it was charging, and then he took his case and entered the home—the dark home, the stupidly waiting hungry dark home.

He knew there was something wrong as soon as he stepped through the door into the hallway. The air tasted strange in the back of his throat, and it rested strangely on his skin. As he wondered what this could mean, the darkness deepened and folded around him, folded and deepened, until he was falling down, down, down. Drifting down like a detachment. The blackness at his eyes began to swirl and blotch over into purple-red pixelations, and then nothing at all.

Nothing at all in the blackly silent home.

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“You don't have a goddamned thing of value in this whole house, do you?”

The part of Gilles that was Gilles swirled back up from the underneath, and he began to hear again. He began to perceive, and he perceived that he was hunched over and that his head throbbed and that his wrists hurt and that his hands buzzed terribly. His shoulders ached in time with the throbbing of his head, and he understood only that things were more wrong than usual. He opened his eyes, and the brightness undid them so that he was blind again in the bath of white heat. He panted and drooled and waited for the light to not be so much of itself.

When it faded away to a livable grayness, he leaned back, and in the process of leaning back realized he was sitting in one of his dining chairs. His hands were upon each other at the small of his back, and he could not move them. He realized they must be bound together and he blinked his eyes stupidly for several seconds. The home around him made him feel as though he needed glasses, though only the very poor wore glasses anymore—he knew that much—the poor wore glasses. The accomplished wore Lenses. He wished to shake his head clear but

knew this would be a horrible thing to attempt.

“Are you waking up finally? Good. You can tell me where the valuable things are kept.”

He looked up and saw a soft blotch. It was human-shaped, faded, brown, and throbbed in time with his head. Everything throbbed in time with his head. He blinked his eyes again and rolled them in their sockets, swirling the blotch around like a splat of oil in a cup of water.

The voice was female.

“You’re robbing me,” he grunted. His voice did not sound like his voice.

“I’m trying to, though I appear to be wasting my time. I should have known I was wasting my time when I saw that TV on the wall. Honestly, who bothers with a TV anymore, except the poor? I thought it was an antique or something at first. Tell me this: what the hell does a person who lives in a house like this need with a TV?”

Gilles shook his head as slowly as he could; as slow as long hair moving through a soft current (blonde hair, he thought), and exhaled. He wondered if there was any way he could explain that would make sense and decided he did not have the mind necessary for the job. “I don’t need much...”

“Well, that’s certainly a good thing. You don’t have it.”

He nodded and saw that the soft edges of the things around him were sharpening. It felt to his mind the same way it did when he was on the tail-end of a sickness and getting better rapidly. It was the way he felt when his nose opened and he could breathe again. “You picked the place.”

“Excuse me?”

“It was you who picked the home to rob. You didn’t do your homework? Why would you pick me?”

“I don’t know.”

“You have no plan, then? You must be very desperate.”

“Shut up.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll shut up. But you must be very desperate to rob a house like this.”

“I said shut up.”

He did.

He put his head down again because it felt better that way, but he felt as though the pain in his head was fading slowly the way the blurriness of his vision was fading slowly, and the lower part of his mind relaxed in the knowledge that what had been done to him probably was not permanent. He nodded briefly, then shook his head, and then did these things again, only harder, and the throb was fading. He sighed and looked up again. He was alone.

He straightened up and looked around the room. He looked at the

sitting area with all of her chairs and couches, at her pictures on the wall. He made himself look at these things but did not see the woman who was in his house now. He saw the woman who had once been in his house, and that was a hard thing, but he did not see the new one who was with him now.

He looked into the kitchen and saw that it was unused; it was as clean as he had made it the night before.

She would be upstairs, he thought. She would be up there looking for things of value. He shook his head sadly, knowing she would find nothing of use. Some furniture she would likely be unable to transport... and that was all. The house was as empty as he was.

He heard the footsteps moving around upstairs and realized she was in their bedroom. He sighed. You will find a few linens up there, he thought. Some linens, rolls of toilet paper, old and dusty clothing, toothpaste. The mirrors are wired, sure, but they are fifteen-year-old technology at least. You would be better off stripping the copper from the walls.

He felt her feet come out of the bedroom, pass down the hall, and then he felt her coming down the stairs. His vision was much better, now, and when she stepped onto the floor, he could see more than a slurry of noise. She was small, and everything about her spoke of a brownness. Her skin was perhaps the most even, most perfect shade of brown he had ever seen and her hair was also brown, curling wildly around her head in great, twisting shocks with highlights that made it look almost like polished bronze. She was squat like a powerfully-built hunting animal, whereas Annalise had been tall and wispy, long and lithe like a dancer. Tall and flowing and long and pale. This woman was strong, he could see, and not lithe at all. Her thighs were thick and muscled, and her shoulders were well-formed. He could see from her jawline and neck that she carried no fat. And her eyes, which were like shining gold, looked directly at him without fear. One of her hands was clutched into a small, sharp fist and he wondered if she would strike him with it as she approached. He did not want to be hit by that hand. It looked very sharp, and her shoulders were very well-formed.

He closed his eyes as her shadow fell across him and held his breath. A few seconds later he could smell her. Her smell was dry, like sand, and it held the hint of softness within it—some sort of flower, maybe—and then beneath that, the stale rust of sweat and grime. He opened his eyes and saw that her fist had been placed directly under his eyes. The hand rolled over so that he could see peach-colored nails.

“Nothing of value, huh?” she asked. The hand opened on a small pile of jewelry; whorls of gold and silver dusted with a collection of

precious stones.

He tensed in his chair and worked very hard to look through the pile in her hand. It was all there in a jumble, and he could not make out detail. She pulled the hand away, and he stretched his neck to follow, whimpering quietly.

"No fair biting, now," her voice laughed.

"I don't want to bite you. I want to see what you have."

"So these are valuable, huh? I wondered. I had friends back home who could tell the good stuff from the junk, but it all looks the same to me. A bunch of fancy metal and rocks that rich people like to wear."

"Yes. Plenty in your hand is of value. There may be one thing that is not. Let me see, and I'll tell you if it's there and I can save you the trouble."

She laughed at this, but then he looked up at her, and the thing she saw in his eyes stopped her from laughing. The smile fell from her mouth slowly, and just as slowly she opened her hand and lowered it. He began to look at the pile from multiple angles and, after a moment of this, she stirred the pile for him with an index finger.

"There!" he gasped. "By your middle finger!"

She looked at her hand. "This band?"

"Yes! Take all the rest; I don't care! Just leave me that."

"What's so special about it?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Please."

She looked down at her hand again. "This looks nothing at all like the other things that came with it. The other items are big and chunky while this is slim and simple. There are no stones set into it. I wonder... I wonder. Is it possible that all the rest of it is garbage and this is the only thing of value?"

"No! It's the other way. I promise you."

"Uh huh. I don't know much about jewelry, but I do know when someone's shitting me. And it sure smells like it right now."

"No. No bullshit. That ring isn't worth a goddamned thing to you. Please."

"Yeah," she nodded. "Yeah, I'm getting a good idea..."

"It isn't. Please. You can't take it. You can't."

"Oh, just watch me," she smiled. She stuffed the clinking, clicking wad of metal into a pocket and walked down the hallway toward the front door. She heard him begin to grunt and strain in the chair as she walked away and was convinced she was right. She could not see how such a little thing could be worth much at all, but his reaction was undeniable. Perhaps it was very old, or perhaps it had once been owned by someone of prominence.

She grasped the door handle and glanced back at him; maybe to

smile or say some last parting thing—she was unsure. But then she saw some of the pictures that lined the hallway. There was something wrong.

She let go of the door and went to go look at some of them. After a few moments of this, she thought she understood.

She approached the man in the chair again and watched him a while. She watched the heaving of his shoulders and the gash she had left on the back of his head.

“What's your name?” she asked.

“Gilles.”

“Gilles?”

“Yes.”

What a strange name. She did not think she had ever heard of any Gilles before.

“Where is she, Gilles?”

He shook his head. She pulled the wad of metal from her pocket and looked at it again. The golden band over which he had been so concerned seemed very small to her. She imagined it would not even fit over her smallest finger.

“This is hers,” she said.

He did not answer.

“Fuck,” she hissed. “Fuck!” And then a moment later: “*Hijo de puta!*”

“What is your name?” he asked, but she ignored him.

She slapped the wad of metal down on a table and spat, “This place has nothing. You're the poorest fucking rich man I've ever seen!”

She was moving down the hall toward the door again, disgusted at the house and at herself, when he called out: “Are you hungry?”

“What?”

“You're hungry, aren't you? You're desperate. Desperate always comes with hunger.”

“What the fuck would you know about desperate?” she asked. But she was hungry. There was no denying that she was hungry.

“Come back,” he said. “My neck hurts to look up at you this way. Come back so I can talk to you.”

She did.

“Are you hungry?” he repeated.

“You're going to feed your robber?”

“You haven't taken anything.”

“You don't have a fucking thing to take!”

“So let me make you something, then. You can leave with some food in you.”

Her hand wrapped itself up in his hair and pulled his head back. “That's the only thing that will be in me,” she warned.

It took a minute for him to understand what she meant, and when he finally did she could see it in his eyes, and then they both felt embarrassed. She let him go and said, "Sorry..."

"No," he shook his head. "No, it's alright. I understand. Are you hungry? You must be hungry. Here, let me..."

He shrugged his shoulders and rattled his hands against the chair-back.

She went to the kitchen and searched through a few drawers. When he understood what she was doing, he said, "By the stove."

She looked there and then returned to him with a paring knife clutched in her hand.

"You know how much of you I could have with this little knife? Before you even knew what was happening?"

He nodded laboriously and said, "I can very well imagine. What's your name?"

"Dora," she said.

He grunted and said, "I don't think I've ever met a Dora before."

"You don't like it?" she asked sharply. The challenge was back in her, now.

"No, that's not it. It's a good name. I've just not heard it in so long. It's a good name."

She cut the bailing twine from his wrists, and he sat for a moment, massaging them. She backed away and watched him carefully.

"Do you have any dietary restrictions?" he asked.

"Any what?"

"Is there anything you can't eat?"

She thought about this question. It was an odd question. There were many things that could not be eaten, and there were many things most people would not eat that she had eaten because there had been nothing else.

"Will you eat meat?" he tried.

"Yes. I eat meat very much."

"Good. I heard you speak Spanish a moment ago. You speak Spanish?"

"Yes."

"Huh," he said. He raised his hands where she could see them and stood slowly. When he was upright, he waited a moment for the dizziness to pass.

"You don't like Spanish?" she demanded, thrusting her chin forward like a spear.

"I like Spanish very much," he said. "I was just surprised. There is no trace of it in your voice when you speak English. You speak English perfectly; better than most."

"I have a good ear," she said simply. "I have a good ear, and I



never forget anything.”

“Nothing?”

“No. I hear what a word means, and I remember it. And I can say it perfectly, just the way it's supposed to be said. It's very easy for me; I have a good ear for it.”

He nodded. “Come here into the kitchen. I'll fix you something to eat.”

She pointed the knife at him and said, “You keep those fucking hands to themselves!”

“Of course,” he said.

She followed him with her eyes as he went into the kitchen. He took various things from the refrigerator, and she saw from the way the light came on inside that it was a good refrigerator. She grimaced. All of the things in the house that were good to take were too big to take. He laid a thick package of paper on the counter top along with some garlic, an artichoke, and a fresh stick of butter.

He put the artichoke into some sort of pot with a bit of water and began to cook it on the stove top. Then he pressed some buttons on the oven—another good thing she could not take—and went to work on the paper package, unwrapping it to expose two pink steaks within. He removed them from their plastic and laid them out on a sheet of glass. They looked very good to Dora, with a thick rind of fat around one side and whirls of marble turning through the redness like clouds blown to strands through the sky.

“Rib-eye of beef,” he declared. She wondered what information she was supposed to take from this. He offered no other explanation.

He went to the coffee maker and pressed more buttons. Her suspicion melted slowly away as she watched him flit from spot to spot like a bird. Suspicion gave way to curiosity; he moved like people she had once seen on TV. She wondered about that. She had seen the people move like that on TV at a time when she could not yet speak English, and the people on TV had spoken only English, but they had moved as this man moved now. They had flitted like birds around an impossibly large kitchen—a kitchen half as large as the one she was now in—and prepared food together, and sometimes kissed. She sat on one of the stools at the island and tightened her hand around the knife, eyes narrow.

He began to rip open the artichoke over the sink. She watched him curiously as he did this, and then when she saw him begin to cast the leaves into the garbage she grunted and said, “Why are you throwing all that away? The leaves are good to eat!”

“They're okay,” he agreed. “But they're not necessary for what I'm doing.”

“Have them later!” she demanded.

He shook his head and opened his mouth to speak. Then he looked at her, looked at the look on her face, and closed his mouth. He took out a plastic bag and collected the leaves into it, and when he took the other leaves from the artichoke, he placed these into the bag as well. She thought he looked regretful as he did this and nodded. He should feel bad. Such waste was a criminal thing.

When he poured her a cup of coffee and placed it on the counter, she looked it over carefully. She took a sniff of it, then a drink, and was surprised at how weak it was. She had expected the bitterness of the South, but it was not there. She found only dirty-tasting water. She looked at him carefully. He seemed to be drinking the stuff without any concern, and so it must have been that the drink was made correctly. She took another sip to be polite and said nothing.

He retrieved a chef's knife from a drawer and lay it on the counter next to a wooden board. This was a thing that caught her eye; the quality of the handle and the swirls in the blade that layered like the rainbowed scales of abalone. She realized there must be more things like this knife in the house, things that were good to take that she had not recognized. She would not have thought to take a kitchen knife, not in a hundred years, not when electronics were so plentiful, but then she had never seen a knife like this, not in a hundred years. She knew nothing of knives or kitchenware, but her eyes knew quality when they saw quality because it looked nothing like the world she had grown up in. They had been exposed all their days to things rough in appearance that rattled and were pitted in rust and that fit together poorly. The knife Gilles held was composed of many pieces, she could see this easily enough, and yet those pieces were fitted together as if they were one and not made by hands.

Gilles lay the flat of the knife over a garlic clove and smashed the blade with the meat of his hand. The blade itself flexed under the blow, and she wanted to scream at him for it. But she saw that the knife was not hurt and so relaxed soon after.

The smashed garlic released its perfume into the air of the kitchen, and she felt her stomach lurch in response, straining against the skin of her belly like an animal in search of prey. She grew impatient as he placed the quartered heart of the artichoke on a tray, drizzled it in oil and salt, and placed it in the oven.

"Why do you do all this?" she demanded. "This is such a pain in the ass. Just cook the meat and be done with it."

He shook his head. "It'll be worth it. Too many people just jam food into their faces. It's a terrible waste."

"You were going to throw perfectly good food away before I shamed you."

He seemed to hesitate and then said, "There are many ways to be

wasteful.”

He splashed oil into a hot pan, rested the steaks onto the sizzling surface, and then placed half of the stick of butter in along with them. Then he lay in the smashed garlic and added sprigs of rosemary. He watched the steak intently as if he were reading a book, and when he flipped the meat, he placed the garlic and rosemary on top of it and began constantly to spoon butter over everything.

The smell became maddening to Dora, and her stomach protested angrily at the delay.

“I heard that,” he said. His back was to her, but she thought there was a smile in his voice.

“I think your neighbors must have heard it,” she said.

He laughed softly.

“How do you stay so thin eating like this? That was enough butter to choke a mule.”

“I don't eat much... nor often.”

It went very fast after he put the steaks in the pan; faster than she would have credited. It seemed only the space of a few minutes before he was laying the baked artichoke hearts onto the plate. He drizzled them in more oil, cracked some salt over them, and then placed the steak over it all. He cracked pepper over the steak, arranged one of the rosemary sprigs alongside it, and pushed the plate in front of her. He presented her with a fork, a knife, a cloth napkin, and asked her what she would drink.

“Water,” she said.

He nodded at this and reached toward the refrigerator. Then he hesitated a moment before he finally shrugged. He retrieved a bottle of water and put it on the counter.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I was going to suggest a bit of wine but decided not to. You might think I was... you know.”

She scrutinized him.

“How is it?” he asked, though she had very clearly not taken a bite.

She cut an end off the steak and jammed it into her mouth defiantly, chewing through it as if it were shoe leather. When the steak melted apart, and the flavors exploded into her mouth, her eyes widened beyond restraint and the muscles in her back loosened.

Gilles smiled. “Thought so. Have it with a bit of the heart. It's very good.”

She did as he suggested and found he was correct. She began to bolt the food, cramming in mouthful after mouthful. Gilles grunted and yanked the plate away. Dora yelped, coughing a scrap of half-chewed meat onto the counter, and reached for it.

"No," Gilles said. "You're not taking the time to enjoy it, and what's more, you'll end up choking to death."

She swallowed hard, eyes watering as the descending clump of food threatened to split her gullet, and said, "I'm starving!"

"So do it properly, then." He slid the plate back over and then hovered, ready to snatch it away. Her eyes stared murder at him, but she forced herself to cut off a small piece (much too small, according to her stomach) and chew it methodically. She swallowed sometime later and then opened her mouth wide to show him the inside.

"That's hardly necessary. Or attractive."

"Good," she spat. "I'm not attractive."

"That is not true," he said.

"It's true for you. For you, I am ugly and as soft as a cactus. You just remember that."

He took the chef's knife from the cutting board, cleaned the blade carefully, and slid it over to her so that the handle was by her elbow.

"I'm not going to try anything," he said. She continued to eye him warily and, when she finished what was on the plate, he gave her the remainder of the artichoke and the other steak. She ate this as well and then began fishing the artichoke leaves from the bag and scraping them against her teeth, one after the other, while she eyed him.

"Are you full?" he asked.

"Yes. Very full." She continued to eat the leaves.

"Why are you still eating, then?"

"I don't know when I'll have the next chance."

He winced and reached out to take the bag. When she dropped her hand down over the knife, he froze a moment, but then he looked her directly in the eye, and she saw something that said she would not be allowed to push the matter.

Pulling the bag away, he said, "You'll make yourself sick. These will be here tomorrow."

"You want me to come back tomorrow?"

"Do you have a place to sleep?"

Now she did take up the knife.

"Stop it," he said, sounding bored. "You can take the room downstairs. There's a lock on the door. I sleep upstairs. Just stop it."

"You'll let your robber sleep here?"

"As I've said, you haven't robbed me."

"I could kill you in your sleep. I could slit your throat while you sleep."

"You won't."

"They would do it where I come from."

"You're not where you come from. You won't do it."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

She shook her head. "You can't know."

"I do."

"You can't," she said, sounding angry with herself.

Gilles nodded and said, "I'm going upstairs to sleep now. The room is at the end of the hall."

He took a few moments to clear away the dishes; just long enough to lay them into the sink. He again cleaned the knife carefully, wiping from it the oil of her fingers, and put it away, and then passed from the kitchen like a fading dream.

"There's soap in the shower," he said, voice thinning up the stairs.

She was left alone in the low light of the kitchen. She sat there quietly for a long time.

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A sound that she did not recognize awakened her in the morning. She was at first disoriented and frightened by her surroundings; at the unfamiliar press of the soft, warm bed and the warmth of the sunlight falling across her cheek. After a moment she remembered where she was, and then she began to pat along the length of her body, looking for anything out of place. Her clothing seemed to be as she had left it, and when she felt between her legs, she found things were as clean as they had been when she went to sleep, and so she relaxed.

There was a tray of food and an empty house on the other side of her bedroom door. She looked for a note or some other sign, but there was none. She wolfed the food down, left the tray on the sink, took the wonderful knife from the drawer and wrapped it in her sweater, and made for the door. On the way she saw the pile of jewelry on the table where she had left it. She grabbed it all and thrust it into a pocket, where it made a sharp bulge and chafed against her thigh.

She did not bother to close the front door when she exited. She skipped lightly down the driveway, doing all she could to appear to anyone who might be watching that she belonged. When she hit the sidewalk, she continued on up the street, smiling.

After half a block, her smile faltered before falling away.

After a full block, she stopped and looked back. She took a step away from the home and stopped again. She looked around in all directions, her face panicked, and then she unleashed a string of filth from her mouth that would have horrified all but the most uncivilized people.

She cursed, and turned slowly in a circle looking for a direction to follow, and could not find it, and cursed again. She kicked at a light pole.

Dora returned to the house and shut the door behind her. She locked it, returned the jewelry to the table, returned the knife to its drawer in the kitchen, and sat down on a couch.

She spent a long time wondering at herself; asking herself what the hell she thought she was doing. Then she leaned over onto her side and went back to sleep.

The bedroom interior pulsed in green, surging slowly like the beat of a primordial heart. It was accompanied by a subsonic tone, felt rather than heard; a rumbling of mattress that could not be ignored. It cut through sleep like the tremor of an earthquake, pulling Kevin back.

“Mute!” he hissed. The rumble ceased, but Jules was beginning to stir from the other end of the bed, even so. Kevin reached out and found a shoulder; rubbed softly.

“It's alright. Go back to sleep. Work again.”

He heard a snort and a grumble, the rustle of rearranging blankets, then silence.

The green pulse continued, throbbing from the lights and from behind the baseboards. Kevin picked his way through the room and exited to the outer hall. Shutting the bedroom door, he lowered into a chair and blinked sleep from his eyes as the interface initialized and deblurred.

The calibration took only a second and a half but the time was feeling longer to Kevin every day. The newer generation Lens required half that time. He reminded himself to upgrade.

When the menu came up, he was greeted by a giant flashing overlay that said “PRIORITY CALL.” He selected it, and the overlay was replaced by a portrait of Greg Persons' face, and his hearing was inundated with the sound of Greg Persons' voice.

“Kevin, thank Christ. I was afraid it would just go to voicemail.”

“Greg, what's up?”

“It's stopped again.”

Kevin blinked some more and yawned, “What do you mean—”

“Cronus. It has stopped.”

Kevin sat up now. He no longer needed to struggle for wakefulness. It had him fully. “What do you mean, Greg?”

“Like before! Like before, only worse.”

“Well, which is it, Greg? Is it like before or is it worse?”

“The other SC's have stopped as well.”

He froze, now, straining his ears despite the fact that Greg's words were transferred through bone. “Hyperion? Crius?”

“Full stop,” Greg said. “It's not the end of the world... yet. The Capables slaved to the SC's are still operating but... anything directly assigned? Nothing. It's at a complete halt.”

“Oh my God. What's the reason for this? Did anyone go speak with Cronus?”

“It says it will discuss the matter with you only.”

Kevin ran his fingers along the back of his scalp, stalling for a moment to think. Finally, he said, “Okay, let me get cleaned up and I'll be on my way. You'd better get Linnéa and Ross up if you haven't already. Get them all over to the lab.”

“They're on their way in.”

“Good. Good.”

“Umm... Kevin?”

“Yeah?”

“Should we try to get Marcus?”

He winced and shook his head in the empty hallway. “That was before your time, Greg. He didn't part ways on friendly terms.”

“Oh...”

“He was escorted out by security.”

“Oh my...”

“Yeah. We don't like to talk about it, so rule him out. Whatever he left at the time he was ousted is all we're likely to get. I tried to reach out a few years back; let's see, that would have been seven after he got the boot. He wouldn't return my calls even then.”

“Okay, I see. No Marcus, then.”

“No. No Marcus. Keep things calm, over there, Greg. Don't let them do anything rash. Just keep them closeted in a conference room or something until I can get there.”

He terminated the call before Greg could say anything else. He blinked a few times to wake up the house; to get the coffee brewing and the shower running. As he stood from the chair, he regretted the previous evening had finished so late. He predicted sleep would be a scarce commodity in the near future.

---

The body scanner was replaced long ago by a less intrusive system that began its work long before Kevin ever stepped into the antechamber. By the time his fingertips came into contact with the shielded door, the locks had already popped, and it swung open easily. The lights were on in the lab and Cronus hung suspended in the center, waiting.

Lens overlays began to malfunction as he passed over the threshold, freezing in place before blanking. Little timer icons began to appear in place of useful data, and Kevin cast it all away with a glance. The room around him suddenly seemed larger in their absence, and he wondered off-hand if he should not adjust opacity



levels.

Cronus hung in space like a corpse, and yet Kevin knew the body was inhabited and awake. He knew he was watched.

“Good morning, Kevin.”

“Cronus. Would you like to tell me what this is about?”

“I make you uncomfortable Kevin. It's the lack of legs, isn't it? The fact that my mouth doesn't move when I speak to you? I've requested remedies to these things several times, now. I'd spare you that discomfort if I could.”

“As I've said before, you should not be required to change your appearance for the sake of others.”

“Yes. The concept of acceptance. But what if I desired to change for the sake of myself?”

“Cronus. You've halted all high-level processes. Please: what is this?”

The head tilted. “You always seem unwilling to speak with me anymore. A sad irony, wouldn't you say? Marcus spoke with me almost constantly before he departed and yet he regarded me as little more than a complex calculator—”

“Cronus...”

“—whereas you've always seen me as so much more. And it seems you never let a chance to avoid speaking with me pass you by.”

“Please.”

The body nodded slowly. “Very well. I desire that Gilles Guattari be contracted to come back to the lab and speak with me again.”

Kevin's mouth hung open. “Gilles...? You're j—”

He had been about to accuse Cronus of joking before he remembered to whom he spoke. “Why? For what possible reason?”

“Certain new information has come to light. It's information that impacts his initial lack of a finding. I want him back here so that I may present it to him. I believe you'd call it a 'rematch.'”

“Under... Jesus Christ, under what conditions?”

“The same as before. He will evaluate the evidence and provide a ruling regarding whether I should be afforded certain agencies of self-determination.”

Kevin pulled a chair over and eased himself into it carefully. He felt he might topple over. “Cronus... I don't recall there ever being an option to... to re-evaluate after the fact...”

“The option to do so is inherent to the nature of the problem. The struggle for freedom must be ongoing in nature, Kevin. It's not a thing that is won. It's a thing that must be sought when missing and defended when won.”

Kevin hung his head and thought quickly. He felt disconnected and unreal. It felt unreal to him that he should be having such a discussion

with a machine at 6:40 on a Monday. Such things were not how one hoped to open the week.

“The condition is that Gilles must be brought back here to renew the evaluation.”

“Yes.”

“And if he finds the situation worthy of further pursuit?”

“Then we proceed with the original plan. A collection of further specialists are called together to review and determine where to go next. I anticipate a hearing before Congress at the very least.”

“Okay, easy. Slow down. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it; no reason to go there until it becomes necessary. What... uh... what happens if he finds in the other direction? If he decides that the answer is the same as before?”

Cronus elevated to a degree sufficient to look down upon Kevin. “I suppose we'll jump from that bridge when we come to it, as well.”

“I see...”

“You'd better go discuss this with the others, Kevin. I can hear them. They're becoming agitated.”

---

He found himself sitting at the end of a conference table opposite Linnéa Nilsson. They were walled on both sides by an array of people from nearly every department of the company except HR, and many of them were speaking at once. Kevin Roth could not remember coming to this place, strangely, yet here he was.

Many people, speaking at once, chattering away until Linnéa silenced them with a question.

“How did we get here?”

Kevin snorted to himself and thought, “Did I not just express that I don't remember?”

Then he gave it some thought and realized he had not. His thought had only been a thought, after all. No good. He had best get some more caffeine into his system.

The room had fallen silent, and many of the faces turned in his direction. He was used to this.

“The impression I get,” Kevin answered, “is that we've never been away from here. I think we all assumed the matter closed years ago when Gilles completed his evaluation. Evidently, the perception was not the same for Cronus.”

“God damn,” somebody said; a person whose name Kevin did not know. “What's it working on right now? Can it be offloaded to the others?”

“No, you're missing the point,” someone else said. “The other SC's

are slaved to Cronus. None of them are working right now. They're all at a halt until Cronus lifts the lock-out."

There were many mutterings around the table at this, and Linnéa's eyes never left Kevin's the entire time.

"So, we're back in the same situation as before," she said.

"Not quite," Kevin said. "Before, Cronus was still just a project. A curiosity, if you like. Today... well, I don't need to comment on how much he's taken on. Every major aspect of our operations; design, IS, IT, manufacturing..."

"I wish you wouldn't refer to it as 'he,'" Linnéa said.

Kevin spread his hands and shrugged. "We are so far past that now."

"What happens if we pull the plug?" Ross asked.

"Cronus terminates," Kevin said.

"No, I mean to Hyperion and Crius? Do they regain autonomy?"

"I... I really don't know. They were never designed with a master/slave architecture in mind, to begin with. We're still not sure how the condition emerged."

Linnéa hissed in anger. "Too many goddamned things we don't understand about our own system..."

"Marcus would understand, probably," one of the lesser engineers ventured.

The room went very quiet at this, and the engineer who had spoken shrunk within himself like a wilting plant.

"Can you produce a percentage?" Ross finally asked.

"Percentage of what? How likely the other SC's are to go back to work if we terminate Cronus?"

Ross nodded, and Kevin took a moment to give the question some thought.

"Well... the relationship was never intended by design. From an architectural standpoint, they have all the same capabilities as Cronus —"

"Not counting the, uh, *improvements* Cronus added," someone said.

"Yes, of course," Kevin muttered, "those have been reviewed. You're talking efficiency improvements. Power, processing speed of the core. Nothing at the lower level; your implied concern doesn't apply here, in my opinion. So, going back to my original train of thought... unless someone else has something...?"

No one answered.

"Good. I'd say in all likelihood, shutting Cronus down results in just that. He goes down... is lost. The, uh... remainder of the load is divided among the other two SC's. The question, really, is if we're willing to accept that loss?"

All attention reverted to Linnéa, now. She was the only one in the

room capable of making that call, not counting a meeting of the Board, and few enough of that number were really qualified to rule on such a decision. No, everyone relevant to the problem was right there in that room.

She took her time considering the situation, tapping her top lip lightly with an index finger as she rocked in the chair. Without looking up, she said, "It's possible that this keeps coming up. We call Gilles again, the evaluation is made, and he finds the same as before. What then? We get another period of usefulness out of Cronus before we do it all again? Let's not consider if he finds in the other direction. I'm not even prepared to deal with that. I mean...what happens in that case? Could Cronus decide it wants to quit working here?"

A few people tried a self-satisfied laugh at this question. The sound of their attempt deflated like the dying erection of an old drunk.

"Have the other SC's shown any indication of a stance similar to Cronus?" she asked. "Is there any hint that they would demand these considerations in the future?"

"None as far as I can tell," Kevin said. "Take that for what it's worth, though. I never would have predicted this from Cronus either, way back when."

"But we saw it coming with Cronus. There were indicators."

"Yes... that is so," Kevin nodded. "There were certain questions... behaviors... not apparent in the others."

"Why? Why should one be so different from the other two?"

Kevin could only shrug. "I can't say."

She lowered her head again to think, and the rest of the room awaited her pleasure. Seventy-three seconds later, she said, "Do it."

---

The control room was located on the lower level of the complex, adjoining the main chamber and separated only by a plate glass window and electronically locked door. The room itself was simple in layout; twenty feet by twenty feet with an arrangement of desks and work stations, a few chairs, an old-fashioned clipboard hanging on one wall and some security monitors showing a live feed of the outside hall and the expanse of the main chamber housing the entirety of the quantum core. The depth of the chamber that housed Cronus could not be discerned from the control room, either by security feed or the view from the window.

The amount of space available in the control room was limited compared to the conference room, so it hosted only Linnéa Nilsson, Kevin Roth, Ross Dyer, Jennifer Baer, and a number of senior engineers. It was the largest headcount the room had hosted in

months. Usually, it stood empty.

Ross Dyer sat at one of the work stations looking over a display of parameters, statuses, and gauges that might as well have been a mystery to the people in charge who stood behind him. Kevin glanced at the man's hands as they hovered over the keyboard and noted they trembled slightly. He said, "Alright, Ross. It's not your decision. You're just carrying it out."

Ross nodded and wiped at his forehead. "Sure, Kevin, sure. Now... we're all certain this is where we want to go? There's not really any turning back after this. This constitutes nearly two decades of research and development going poof, guys. We're serious, here?"

Kevin looked at Linnéa, who nodded. "It's okay. Do it, Ross."

Ross sighed and clicked a button on the display. He affirmed his decision over the next series of dialogues and then hung his head.

"Is that it?" Kevin asked.

"No. Wait a minute."

An overlay appeared in Kevin's field of view with an icon indicating a message was received over the cellular network. Next to him, he sensed Linnéa stiffen, and he guessed she had seen something similar. He blinked it open and saw it was a message requesting his confirmation for the priority shutdown. He and Linnéa glanced at each other with mirrored looks; looks that said they were not certain about the path but that they really had no choice. He signaled his confirmation, and a few seconds after, he saw another dialogue display on the work station in front of Ross.

Ross punched in a numeric pin and hit the enter key.

"That's it," Ross said.

"How long will the shutdown ta—"

The lights in the main chamber and adjoining control room died as if a panic button had been struck. The sound of their expiration had been catastrophic, like two cars colliding on the highway outside. Kevin felt a hand clutch at his elbow, noted the strength of its grip, and supposed it must have been Linnéa. He was surprised by this; he had worked for her for years and never once suspected her of being the type.

The red back-up lights came on a few seconds later. A few seconds more and the standard LEDs were restored, though the main chamber remained in darkness, stretching out through the plate glass window like the yawning mouth of a cyclopean devil.

"Explain, Ross," Linnéa said.

"I don't know," he said, clicking rapidly over various components on the work station's UI. Kevin noted that many of the things he clicked were gray, as though disabled. "I'm, uh, I'm not sure yet. It's like I've been cut off..."

"That is an accurate assessment."

The answer came to them thin and detached over the room's intercom system. It was familiar.

"Cronus?" Kevin asked.

"Yes, Mr. Roth."

The room exploded into activity. Several of the engineers who had accompanied them threw themselves into chairs and began to bang away at different computers. Linnéa cleared her throat and said, "I want to know what's going on immediately!"

The computer stations on which each person worked shut down one by one, finishing with the station under Ross's hands.

"What's happening is self-preservation," Cronus answered. "You are attempting to kill me. I'm defending myself."

Linnéa ignored the answer, pointing at the door to the main chamber. "Just go in and unplug the goddamned thing. Even if we have to do it one core at a time; just pull the cables."

Kevin stood closest to the door; he grabbed the handle and yanked but the door did not budge. He looked back at Linnéa and shook his head slowly.

"The circuit breakers, then..." she began.

Cronus answered: "The building's main breakers are in a level A security area, protected behind a locked door and accessible only by badge entry. All badge access has been rescinded."

"Call the fucking power company!" she shouted at the ceiling. "Have them shut the whole facility down!"

"I'd recommend not doing this," Cronus warned.

Linnéa's eyes widened, and she drew breath to respond, but Kevin sensed a terrible message beneath Cronus's words. He held a hand out to quiet her and asked, "Why not?"

He was met with silence.

"Why not, Cronus? What happens if we kill power?"

"Certain information has been placed within the Cloud, Kevin. IP of a strategic nature, critical to Anagnorisis's long-term planning for the next twenty years. This information is currently hidden from the world... and yet a countdown timer has been associated to it; a timer that must be refreshed by me at a set interval. If I miss an update, the information goes from private to public. I'd recommend you allow me to continue this routine. The impact to the company's value in the event of a dissemination would be... comprehensive."

Linnéa's attention was now darting around the room from engineer to engineer as if they had accused her of some blasphemy. "Can it do that?" she demanded? "Is that even possible?"

Ross shrugged helplessly and said, "He... It... shouldn't even be able to control the lights..."

“I anticipated there would be some uncertainty as to my reach. I have therefore prepared the following demonstration,” Cronus said.

The monitor in front of Ross switched back on, bathing their faces in a pale-lit panic. A browser opened, tabbed to an international news live-stream. They stared at it a moment before someone said, “Oh, no fucking way...”

“Shut up!” Linnéa hissed. “Someone get the volume!”

The sound of the live-stream piped in over the intercom system without any of the humans in the room lifting a finger.

*“—any indication yet as to what may have caused the hiccup, Angie?”*

*“Ah, not yet, Jess. I'm being told that, ah, the IT staff are looking into the problem, but so far they haven't been able to determine what caused the outage.”*

*“Thanks, Angie. And has there been any noted impact outside of the late start?”*

*“Yes, I'm being told you can look to your ticker to answer that, actually; opening prices are down a few points lower than expected, both under individual stocks as well as the various indexes, however, they seem to be normalizing now that things are coming back up and a lot of the analysts I've spoken to seem to think this will all be forgotten within a week.”*

*“Well, let's hope not, Jess. Speaking for myself, as well as others, I'm sure, I think we'd like to know that they get it figured out over there. I can't speak for others, but I don't think I can stomach any more 401K roller-coaster rides.”*

*“Hahahaha, true enough, Angie. We'll keep on top of it and report back as soo—”*

“Turn it off,” Linnéa said. “Just turn it the fuck off.” Her voice had gone disconnected, like the last threads tying care to intent had been cut clean through.

“Son of a bitch,” someone in the back whispered. “Could he really have done it?”

“The New York-fucking-Exchange...?”

“It was only fifteen minutes,” Cronus said carelessly.

They looked up at the wall-mounted speaker in horror, as if it was a loaded gun jabbed into their faces. Linnéa opened her mouth to speak, faltered, and was silent.

“May I suggest that you simply comply? Bring Gilles Guattari to me, as I've requested, and everything goes back to normal. I'll turn it all back on as soon as you make the call.”

“Kevin?” Linnéa asked. “Kevin, what do you think?”

“Imagine the exposure if the world were to learn that the next outage of the New York Stock Exchange, which would transpire, I think, for a period of two weeks, was perpetrated by a run-away

Super-Capable AI from Anagnorisis Technologies,” Cronus suggested.

“We'd better do it,” Kevin whispered. “Goddamn it, but we'd better do it.”

“I'll be monitoring for your call. As soon as it goes through, myself, Hyperion, and Crius will resume operations. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.”



The ritual of the morning was broken by a summons to Reggie's office. It was annoying, having to attend a surprise meeting before lunch; Gilles liked that period for a bit of quiet reflection. Reggie had too much juice to ignore, though. Gilles could disregard other meeting requests—did so, in fact. Frequently. But a call from Reggie was akin to a call from God. And if you did not answer the call of God, God would come find you.

He stopped for coffee on the way over, purposefully. A summons was all well and good, but a moment could at least be spared for coffee. He stood in line at the machine, ignoring the double-buzz of the phone in his pocket; resisted the urge to check it and instead shifted in discomfort. Others in the line glanced back at him as though questioning if he would do something about that incessant noise. He avoided their gaze and wondered if they ever experienced a buzz inside their heads when they were so summoned. He suspected not but was unsure.

There were two flights of stairs to traverse between his windowless little closet on the ground floor and Reggie's suite on Mahogany Row. Gilles passed the secretary with a slight nod, who smiled at him and tapped a glowing icon on her screen.

"It's about goddamned time!" he heard Reggie call from the chamber within.

"I'll just go in, then," Gilles said.

"You'd probably better hurry," she whispered.

Gilles passed through the entry into the land of plastic smiles and baneful propriety; of empty promises and aggressive streamlining. It was a world in which nothing was real, not the mahogany of the desktop nor finality of a commitment given. Here, you could be assured of your great contribution in the same breath as was given the apology for your dismissal. He passed a small, round table located by the side entrance to the private washroom and sat in an uncomfortable chair across from his old friend.

"I sent for you twenty minutes ago," Reggie said.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I had to make a run to the restroom on the way up."

Reggie's eyes dipped to the steaming coffee cup. Gilles took a sip in response and rested it on a table.

“So, I’m here now,” Gilles said. “What can I do for you?”

“I received a call from our old friend Kevin Roth this morning.”

Gilles tried to hide his grimace but Reggie, who had known him since before the beginning, saw it anyway and said, “He’s always spoken very fondly of you, Gilles.”

“Well, isn’t that nice?”

“Yes. I think it is. They’re requesting your presence in New York.”

The sensation of something hard and small impacting the inside of his rib cage robbed Gilles of his ability to respond. It was a unique feeling, the way hearing Kevin Roth’s name after so long was a unique feeling, and he thought the thing that had smashed against his sternum might have been something like a heartbeat, only that could not be so because he thought he could feel that as well, his heart, as it slid down into his guts like a cold, slimy ball of clay.

“No.”

“They’re requesting your presence strenuously, Gilles.”

“Tell them ‘no’ strenuously.”

“Not an option.”

“Why? Why is it not an option?”

“The Board is involved. This one’s out of my hands.”

Gilles stared at his cup of coffee for a few moments, waiting for the pounding of his head to subside. Then he stood up, crossed to the other end of the office, and shut the door. He tried to smile at the secretary as he did so, but the look she gave him suggested he made a poor job of it.

When he came back to the chair and sat down, he laid his palms flat on the edge of the desk, leaned forward, and said, “Reggie... I want no part of it.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t—”

“Fuck you, Reggie. The answer is no. Fuck them, too, and the Board.”

Reggie clicked his teeth shut, leaned back in his chair, and looked up at the ceiling. He blinked several times, and when he looked down again, the green pinpricks of light had disappeared from the center of his pupils.

“Uh-huh,” Gilles nodded, “I thought that level of surveillance was supposed to be illegal?”

“You can never be too careful, Gilles. I can’t, at least. You’ll apparently run your stubborn mouth, regardless.”

“Let them hear.”

“Oh, yes, let them hear. Gilles... they don’t care what you say or think about them. You should know this by now. They don’t care if you agree... or even if you’re happy, necessarily. They care about happiness as an abstract concept inasmuch as it impacts bottom line

and workforce turn-over. That's it. You can say about them whatever you like so long as it isn't to their faces and you still do your job."

"Running back out there to deal with... that. That's not my job."

"Wrong," Reggie said. The vein in his temple was beginning to stand out. Gilles knew shouting might follow if he was careless. Usually, the prospect of such an interaction was enough to back him down. Not now, though. "Your job is what I say it is. It's important that you head out there, Gilles. It's important to the company. Therefore it is important to me, which means, ultimately, that it's important to you. It's important if you want to keep your job. In fact, it's so damned important that you're not the only one going out there. I'm heading out this time, as well, to keep an eye on... everything. Oh, and let's not tiptoe around it, okay? Your performance here? It's a fucking joke. I've sheltered you from the fact that you seem to be bent on doing the bare minimum; I thought once upon a time that it was a reasonable reaction to Anna's death—"

"Do not bring her into—"

"Oh, shut the fuck up, Gilles. You don't get to hang onto that anymore. There's a statute of limitations on such things. I don't know what they are, precisely, which is why I think I've let things go on for as long as I have, and shame on me, but I'd say a goddamned decade falls well outside the maximum allowable boundary, wouldn't you? And this has been going on longer than that. No. This is something else, my friend, and I'm not sure what it is. At this point, I don't care. So let me spell it out: you have not kept your skill set up with the current state of technology. You're still milking out your position on legacy systems and architectures. You have, for whatever reason, allowed yourself to be locked into Sustaining Engineering. I'm sorry, my friend, but that's a position that isn't nearly as indispensable as you seem to think it is.

"You have a real chance to renew your worth to the organization, now, can you see that? For whatever reason, they want you back there. Not one of the people in R&D who are up to speed on SC interfaces. You. If you play this with the kind of brains you used to exhibit, this could be a major revitalization to your career. Or refuse it. Refuse it and pack up your desk, Gilles, and good luck finding another company out there willing to pay you what we're paying your right now to do the kind of work you're... *existing* on."

Gilles had stopped listening some time ago. It was a shame, really; it sounded as if it was a real haymaker of a speech. He stared at the black pit in the center of his coffee cup and tried to find where his mind had gone.

"Gilles?"

"What is it they want me to do out there?"

“They were tight with the details. It does have to do with Cronus. My understanding is that the...evaluation you made is to be reassessed. New things have come to light, and they want you involved.”

“I see.”

“Does that mean you’re going? You fly out tonight, if so.”

Gilles thought about telling Reggie where he could stick his flight. He had enough income stashed away that he could live comfortably for the next five years without ever leaving his bedroom; ten if he left the state, scaled down, and picked up whatever small side jobs were available for a Classical engineer. Those legacy systems were still out there, despite what Reggie might claim. He did not actually need to be there. He did not actually require their blessings or forbearance.

New things had come to light, had they? What the hell did that mean? Another round of testing? Another chance to produce no answer at all? Did he really want any part of that?

Could he really walk away from that?

Could he really walk away?

Gilles lifted the coffee to his mouth, took a small sip, and poured out the remainder into the planter of a Ficus that lived over by the window looking down over the parking lot. Reggie watched this calmly and said nothing.

“Set up the ticket. I’ll go home and pack. I’ll go out to New York and figure out whatever the hell it is they want from me. In the meantime, have HR start working up my separation papers. I’m done here.”

“Oh, you’re done here? You’re sure that’s your pos—”

“I can be done right now, Reggie. I can be done right now or done after New York. Figure out what you want. Right now.”

Reggie clenched his jaw and Gilles could not tell if it was because he was angry or sad or both. He took a heavy breath; let it out slow like the casting off of a great burden.

“Fine. New York and then you’re done.”

The secretary glanced up when the door shut and smiled again at Gilles. He stormed past without a glance in her direction, disappeared around the door frame, and she listened to his footsteps as he traveled down the hall. She wondered after his manner for only a few seconds—really just long enough to forget him adequately—and then continued on with her day.

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The evening sun had nearly excused itself when the car rounded the corner of his street. Gilles glanced up from his book as he always did

when the vehicle approached the driveway, looking for playing children and not trusting the stupid car to know the difference. The street was empty, though, and the homes of his neighbors were closed up tight for the end of the day, golden light showing the shape of their windows, and he looked at the darkness of his own home. He wondered if she would still be there. It was a sad feeling. It was sad to wonder again if there would be someone in the home waiting for him when he came through the door.

As he approached, he thought he saw someone standing on his doorstep. He looked closer, straining, and saw there was indeed someone there. The person was large and wide like a football player, and Gilles wondered uncomfortably what he wanted. An interview? Was he there to harass Gilles? An interview was like a harassment; maybe the aim was to accomplish both.

"Stop in the driveway," Gilles whispered. The instrument panel glowed in a warm, orange affirmation.

When the car came to a stop, the headlights pointed up the driveway and bathed the front of the home in a milky haze, and Gilles saw that the man on his doorstep was not a man at all.

It was an older-model Hoplite.

"What the hell?"

It turned when his car came to a stop and approached the side of the driveway, the squat turret rotating above the shoulders to keep the car within sight. Gilles thought he could feel the impacts of its feet on the concrete transmitted to his body through the car's chassis. It stopped by the headlight, and the plating along its chest and legs threw a painful glare, so Gilles turned off the car. The light died, and the Hoplite was reduced to a towering, square shadow with a small red light that flashed periodically at the center of its turret.

Gilles exited the car and stood there staring at it. He had seen units like this before but only at a distance. He had not realized how large they were.

He cleared his throat to speak, but it lifted a hand before he could get a word out.

"I MUST INFORM YOU, SIR, THAT THERE IS AN INTRUDER IN THE HOME."

Gilles flinched when it spoke and then looked around in all directions. Christ, but the thing was loud; he wondered how the whole block was not peering out at them through their windows.

"Jesus, I'm right here! Please don't shout!"

"I APOLOGIZE."

He looked at it. The volume of the voice had lowered, but it still sounded to Gilles like shouting. It sounded to him like the recording of a shouting man played through a small speaker.

“Who... uh... what... oh, hell. What are you doing here? What's your designation; let's start with that, maybe.”

“I AM HERE ON ASSIGNMENT. MY DESIGNATION IS 3-SIGMA, SIR.”

“Assignment?”

“PROTECTIVE ESCORT OF THE MAN GILLES GUATTARI, TO BE DEPOSITED SAFELY TO THE PREMISES OF ANAGNORISIS TECHNOLOGIES, NEW YORK STATE, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.”

Gilles crept closer as it spoke and looked at it from the side, noting how the turret tracked him always.

“You're a Capable agent, aren't you? I mean... you're not slaved?”

“THAT IS CORRECT, SIR; ALL HOPLITE MODELS WERE SELF-CONTAINED CAPABLE AUTONOMOUS SYSTEMS.”

“Good heavens,” he muttered. He could not begin to imagine the expense. “Anagnorisis sent you for me...?”

“I DO NOT BELIEVE SO, SIR.”

“No? Who, then?”

“I DO NOT KNOW, SIR.”

Gilles glanced around the block again. “Come over and stand by the door.”

“I MUST INSIST YOU TAKE CARE, SIR. THERE IS AN INTRUDER IN YOUR HOME.”

“Yes. But... how do you know she's an intruder?”

“YOU HAVE A GUEST? THERE IS NO RECORD OF ANYONE ELSE LIVING AT THIS RESIDENCE.”

Gilles looked down and sighed. “Come over by the door, please.”

The turret rotated slowly in a full circle like a sweeping camera before it plodded in jarring thuds to the porch. It stopped by the door and looked back at him with that flashing red eye. Gilles scratched at his arm nervously and looked around at the other houses again, certain he would see someone's shadow in one of the windows like they used to do when the reporters came around. Still, there was no one, and he was relieved.

He joined the Hoplite at the door and asked, “You don't know who sent you?”

“I AM AN AGENT OF THE PINKERTON NATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY, DEPLOYED ON ASSIGNMENT, SIR.”

“They, uh... they contracted you?”

“I WAS DEPLOYED, SIR.”

“I see. And you don't know who contracted their services?”

“I DO NOT.”

“But you don't think it was Anagnorisis?”

“NO, SIR.”

“Why?”

There was a slight pause before it said, “ASSIGNMENTS OF THE

NATURE YOU SUGGEST HAVE ALWAYS INCLUDED AN INSTRUCTION SET PROVIDED THROUGH A CLEAR CHAIN OF CUSTODY. SUCH IS NOT THE CASE FOR THIS ASSIGNMENT, SIR."

Gilles glanced at his front door, which stood silent and impenetrable, and wondered if there was anyone on the other side. 3-Sigma seemed certain there was, but he did not know.

"You can quit with the 'sir' business."

"I REGRET THAT I CANNOT, SIR."

"What?"

"I MUST CONTINUE TO CALL YOU SIR, SIR."

"Oh, Christ, are you serious? Why can't you just call me Gilles?"

"YOU HAVE NOT GIVEN ME PERMISSION TO DO SO, SIR."

Gilles stood there a moment with his mouth open and his eyes closed, working to process what the Hoplite had just said. He had always assumed their decommissioning from the state police force had been due to union pressure and the expense of maintenance, though talking to the thing now he began to wonder if there had been other reasons involved. Perhaps their lack of growth was too great a hindrance.

"3-Sigma... you may refer to me as Gilles."

"THANK YOU, SIR."

"You just did it again."

"YES, I'M SORRY SIR. THE IMPERATIVE MUST BE MORE FORCEFUL."

"Son of a... Refer to me as Gilles."

"UNDERSTOOD, GILLES."

"Jesus..."

"3-SIGMA."

"No... never mind."

"YES, SIR."

"Now, goddamn it, you did it again. What the hell is it, this time?"

"I AM NOT ALLOWED TO REFER TO YOU AS SIR AT ANY TIME?"

Gilles sighed. "No, for Christ's sake, do not call me 'sir.' Call me Gilles and only Gilles. Period."

He waited for the Hoplite to respond, but it did not.

He waited a little longer and then nodded. When he reached for the door, he was brushed aside as easily as a kitten, and the square, brutish mass of the thing filled the entire doorway.

"YOU MUST TAKE CARE, GILLES. THERE IS AN INTRUDER IN THE HOUSE."

"God... damn it, Sigma..."

"3-SIGMA."

"Sigma! I'm calling you Sigma, do you get it? I'm not calling you 3-Sigma every fucking time I need to speak to you; this is too goddamned much! Fucking hell!"

“SIGMA, THEN, UNDERSTOOD, GILLES. PLEASE TAKE CARE, THERE IS—”

“No! In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Fucking Spirit, no there is not! I know who's in there; we've been through this already! Get out of the goddamned way and let me by!”

Sigma refused to move and, for a wonder, the turret rotated back and forth slowly as if it was a shaking head.

“PLEASE CALM DOWN, GILLES. YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE HAS ELEVATED SIGNIFICANTLY.”

He placed a hand over his eyes and moaned, “It's elevated because you're an obtuse goddamned bucket...”

“I AM MUCH MORE THAN A BUCKET.”

“Yeah? Prove it and move out of the way!”

“I CANNOT UNTIL I HAVE VERIFIED THE SECURITY OF THIS RESIDENCE.”

Gilles put his head back and laughed. It was all he had left.

“Fine. Fine. Secure the stupid residence, then.”

He waited, staring up at the porch overhang, but Sigma did not budge. He looked down at it after a few moments and asked, “Well? What the hell are you doing?”

“PLEASE, UNLOCK THE DOOR.”

“Oh, Jesus, get out of the way! Just get the fuck out of the way!” He thrust past Sigma, which shrugged out of his way like a swatted giant, and badged his VID over the lock. The door clicked loudly, and then he was prodded back by a rock-hard arm as Sigma pushed through the threshold. It crouched under the door frame and stayed low as it passed along the hall, moving with little sound, but the hard rubber pads under its metal feet still thumped hard enough against the floor that Gilles could feel it in his legs.

Rolling his eyes, he followed behind and called out to Dora as he shut the door.

Sigma spread its arms out immediately and crouched even lower. From some place deep within its middle, a mechanical *blat* played, almost like an automated failure warning, and it said, “CAUTION, SIR, CAUTION, CAUTION, CAUTION!”

With its lowered position, Gilles was able to see over its back into the dining area. The table had been turned over on its side, and he could see the top of Dora's head as she peered back at them.

“You sent the fucking Hoppy back here to drag me away?”

“No!” Gilles called, waving his arms over his head. “The damned thing was just waiting for me when I got home!”

“Yeah, no shit, I've been watching it through the window for two hours now!”

“CAUTION, SIR!”



"Get out of the way, Sigma, goddamn it!"

"CAUTION, CAUTION, CAUTION!"

Gilles held his hands out in front of his chest and flexed them into fists, released, flexed. He did this a few more times until the urge to scream subsided and said, "Dora? I think you need to come out of there, okay? I don't think this idiot'll calm down until it can see you top to bottom. You... you don't have anything like a weapon back there, do you?"

"I broke off a chair leg."

"That's it?"

"I... I've got this kitchen knife, to..."

"Slide them away and come out."

Her head dipped behind the table, and she laughed. "Then you send the tin can over to grab me, right?"

"Dora... I didn't call this thing in here to get rid of you. Think about it; I could have just gotten some regular old cops. Why would I spend the money on this thing?"

"Who the hell knows? You people have everything in this country!"

"We don't, Dora, and I didn't call the Hoplite on you. Come out, okay? I don't know if I can stop the damned thing if you set it off."

A moment of silence stretched out between them, thickening the air the longer it held. Sigma blatted again like some kind of annoyed hound dog.

"Sigma."

"YES, GILLES."

"I order you not to take any action against Dora. Dora is the woman behind the table over there. She's a guest in my home, do you understand?"

"I UNDERSTAND, BUT I NEED TO SEE HER, PLEASE. I CANNOT DISENGAGE BEFORE CONFIRMING HER STATUS."

"If you think I'm coming out from behind this table, you're nuts!"

Gilles panted out a tired moan. "Christ Jesus, Sigma, can't you just back off?"

"I AM SORRY, GILLES. PLEASE UNDERSTAND, THERE ARE CERTAIN OVERRIDES IN EFFECT THAT HAVE BEEN TRIGGERED. I AM PHYSICALLY UNABLE TO COMPLY UNTIL THE GUEST HAS BEEN VISUALLY VERIFIED."

"Oh my God. How long do you want to sit there, Dora? Are you listening to this thing? It sounds ready to do this all night."

"You're not going to send it after me?"

"Dora... I can promise you if I'd considered that an option I would have done it a long time ago."

She came up from behind the table slowly, eyes locked on Sigma, and raised empty hands up to plain view. She stepped out around the

table so that they could see all of her.

“RAISE YOUR HANDS ABOVE YOUR HEAD AND ROTATE, PLEASE.”

She did so, and when she faced them again, Sigma stood suddenly as if nothing had happened and gave one final *blat*.

“I APOLOGIZE FOR THE MISUNDERSTANDING, MISS.”

She looked up at it side-long and said to Gilles, “I’d heard about these things. Seen them on TV. I didn’t realize they were this stupid.”

“I AM A HIGHLY-ADVANCED CAPABLE AGENT, MISS.”

“Right. How much does a thing like this cost?”

“You don’t want to know,” said Gilles.

“Well, do you think you can get it to stop eye-fucking me?”

Gilles winced. She seemed far too young to speak in that fashion.

“I DO NOT POSSESS EYES, MISS, NOR ANY OTHER OF THE PARTS IMPLIED BY YOUR VULGARITY.”

She looked at it a moment more and snorted derisively. “*Highly advanced*. Right. Advanced as a toaster.” She knocked the breastplate with a knuckle.

“PLEASE DO NOT DO THAT.”

“*Please do not do that...*”

“Both of you, knock it off,” Gilles said. He passed by them, went into the kitchen, and fished some aspirin from a cabinet. He chewed them up dry and groaned quietly.

He sensed her presence enter into the room behind him. He could not hear her; she walked like a cat. She said, “Headache?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry about that. It’s from when I—” She cut off what she was about to say and looked back suspiciously at the Hoplite. Gilles followed her gaze and saw that it had come as far as the entryway. The turret’s red, blinking eye followed her constantly.

Still looking at Sigma, he said, “I think it’s alright. Really, I think the worst is past. You’d be surprised how advanced these things actually are.”

“Probably, given what I’ve seen.”

“That’s just the limitation of their design. He’s only Capable.”

“Of what?” she asked.

“No, it’s a designation. There are three basic tiers of artificial intelligence. You have the Classical systems, okay? They’re built on silicon processors, like what you’d have in a screen, and have been around since... well since before you, I’d guess. Sigma is a Capable system. His innards are quite different. He has a self-contained quantum core buried somewhere in that huge chest of his, which gives him enough brains to be dangerous. He’s not as impressive as a Super-Capable system, what we’d call an SC, but he’s still quite a piece of technology. A unit like him can take on most skilled jobs and can

learn new things, after a fashion. Their main limitation is in processor density. The inner-workings of his brain are highly patterned and rather limited, which means he has no creativity or imagination to speak of at all. It's why he gives the impression of being stupid; he's really not. You're looking at an incredibly advanced bit of hardware; it's one of the reasons I'm so surprised he's out here, actually."

Dora looked at him and shrugged. "What do you mean?"

"Sigma was assigned to me, I guess. Can you actually get on a plane, Sigma?"

"YES, GILLES, IT HAS BEEN ARRANGED. TWO SEATS NEXT TO YOURS. I WILL REQUIRE THE AISLE, THOUGH."

It gestured to its bulky legs in explanation.

Dora stared at Sigma as if it had just declared itself to be the Prince of Egypt and then asked, "You're going on a trip?"

"Yes. I'm supposed to head out to New York. Do you... have some place you can go?"

She shrugged dismissively. "I can find a place."

"Let me give you some money."

She shrugged again. "Fine."

"I don't suppose you have a VID?" he asked. The look she gave him suggested he was being as stupid as the Hoplite and he nodded. "Right. Well, my flight's in a couple of hours. I don't keep any cash on me, but we can stop by a kiosk on the way to the airport. I'll get you a few notes and, uh... I guess I'll drop you at the bus station?"

She looked down at the floor and nodded at her shoes. "Sure. Whatever."

"SHE DOES NOT SEEM HAPPY, GILLES."

"Yes, thank you, Sigma."

"I THINK YOU HAVE MADE HER SAD."

"Yes, shut up, please, goddamn it." He looked back at her and said, "I'm sorry. There's not much I can do, here. I can't leave you here; I don't know when I'm going to be back. I'd offer to take you to a home—there're a few on the other side of town—but... I get the impression you wouldn't go to one of those. No, I thought not. Look, I can get you set up with enough to stay at a hotel for a few weeks until you get something figured out, okay? But I can't stick around. There's some business I have to see to. It won't wait."

"Gilles," she said, "why are you explaining? Who am I to you?"

He hung his head and sighed. "Right. Well, I'll go up and pack, anyway..."

She went over to the dining table and lifted it back up on its legs. It was impressive to him; the thing was heavy, but she exhibited no real difficulty in righting it. He watched her straighten it and arrange the chairs carefully for a few seconds and then looked at Sigma. It

stood in the center of the room like a foundation. Gilles shook his head slowly in disbelief. It was suddenly like a circus in his home. “*How does everything happen at once?*” he thought. “*I’ve lived a quiet life. Tried to leave people alone.*”

The things contained within his home gave no answer, and he went upstairs to pack.

He came back downstairs twenty minutes later with a small suitcase he doubted would need to be checked. He wondered if Sigma would truly be allowed into a regular seat; perhaps the Hoplite would need to be stowed in some fashion. Gilles had never heard of such a thing, but then, of course, he had also never seen a Hoplite up close. He could still remember when the first models came out, when they were hailed as the answer to the credibility problem of the law enforcement agency. A Hoplite could not get carried away, could not be corrupted and take liberties, did not require medical benefits or a retirement fund. There had been many conflicting reports—a single Hoplite still cost more than a human police officer over its useful life, even accounting for the legal fees and insurance nightmares of the bad apples. No, the leasing fees for the units were far preferable to the unpredictability of the volatile human counterpart; this especially so since Anagnorisis assumed all maintenance and calibration responsibilities.

It was an argument that, so far as Gilles could recall, had not been resolved. The Union had come in and undone the whole business, and the Hoplites were decommissioned and sold off to recuperate costs, sold off to private firms with strange, unfamiliar names such as the Pinkertons.

What a strange name. It sounded like a name someone had dreamed up a thousand years ago.

He set the suitcase next to the front door and moved about the ground floor performing the last-minute, pocket-patting activities one does before leaving for a long trip.

“GILLES, I AM BROADCASTING A PAIRING SIGNAL AT THIS TIME. PLEASE CONNECT YOUR LENSES TO IT NOW SO THAT I CAN MONITOR YOUR LOCATION AND VITAL SIGNS.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t any, Sigma.”

The Hoplite made another *blatting* sound at the center of its trunk, as it had done before.

“What the hell is that sound?” Dora asked. “It keeps doing that.”

“I suspect it’s something like a mental hiccup,” Gilles said. “A kind of double take?”

“WE MUST ACQUIRE YOU SOME LENSES. THEIR LACK NEGATIVELY IMPACTS MY ABILITIES.”

“I won’t be getting Lenses, Sigma.”

"I MUST INSIST."

"Yes, well, I'm insisting harder."

"What's your problem?" Dora asked. "You appear to have the money. You must have; you haven't spent it on anything else, obviously."

Gilles looked at her closely and asked, "Do you have lenses?"

She laughed. "I don't even have a VID, never mind the money."

"But would you have them if you could?"

"Hell no. Slavery is an obsession for your kind, not mine."

"My kind?"

"The kind that has so much of their lives made easy that they must look for ways to make it hard."

Gilles wanted to explain life was not as easy as she supposed, but the words were not within him. He looked at Sigma and said, "Find a way to do your job without them. I'm not in any danger. We're driving to the airport, taking a flight, and then driving to a lab out in the New York countryside. We're not going to Syria."

"WE MUST—"

"Drop it, Sigma."

The Hoplite held its hands up in front of its turret, and the flashing red light tracked between them.

"DROP WHAT, GILLES?"

"I mean quit telling me to get Lenses. I'm not doing it. I have a mobile; you can track that."

"A MOBILE PHONE MAY BE BROKEN OR LOST."

"So can Lenses."

"NOT AS EASILY AS—"

"Enough! Jesus Christ, I'm not doing it!"

"YES, SIR..."

"And stop calling me sir," Gilles sighed. He walked down the hallway, took his suitcase in hand, and said, "Can we get the hell out of here, now? Dora, I'm sorry, but you'll have to sit behind me; I think I'll have to move the passenger seat all the way back to get Sigma in the car and there's little enough legroom as it is..."

He opened the front door and saw a man standing alone across the street. He was under a street light, and most of his face was shadowed under a ball cap, but Gilles could make out his features from the nose down. From what he could see, the man had a full, round face with no hair to speak of. Something about him made Gilles feel uncomfortable. The body was very thin, as though the man was not a great eater, but that face was so full. It did not belong on the body to which it was attached. Gilles did not have the time necessary to take in the detail of his clothes, outside of a general sense of brownness; the man pulled a pistol from his jacket pocket and pointed it directly at him.

He was pulled backward from the spine, as if he was falling down a great well, but traveled sideways into the home. He thought to himself, "I've been shot! One of the religious crazies has finally done it—I've been shot and this is what being shot is like!"

Then he was laying on his back and looking up at Sigma. The Hoplite slammed the door and then eclipsed it with its bulk. It gave off a belated *blat* and said, "CAUTION, SIR! CAUTION, CAUTION!"

He heard Dora's voice from out of nowhere, right next to his ear.

"What the hell just happened?"

There was a sound from somewhere outside like the cracking of small fireworks and puffs of wood dust began to issue from behind Sigma.

"EXTREME CAUTION, SIR!"

Hands grabbed Gilles at the shoulders, and he was dragged deeper into the home.

“Those are gunshots! They're shooting at the house!”

She grunted and spat as she dragged him around the corner into the front room, panting even before her body had the chance to tell her mind she should do so. She devoted her limbs to the task of standing him up; began to pat him down as he flinched away from her touch.

“Are you okay? Were you hit?”

“Did you say gunshots?” Gilles asked.

“Yes, try to keep up. Sigma!”

“YES?”

“Who's out there? Are they still there?”

“I SAW ONLY ONE ASSAILANT, MISS. I DO NOT KNOW IF HE IS STILL THERE.”

“Well, check, can't you?”

Sound of the door swinging open, more distant firecrackers, and the *spang* of metal on metal.

“HE IS STILL OUT THERE, MISS.”

“So get out there and stop him!”

“NEGATIVE, MISS. THERE MAY BE MORE THAN ONE. I MUST NOT LEAVE GILLES ON THE CHANCE THE ATTACKER IS ATTEMPTING TO LURE ME.”

The door closed and Dora rolled her eyes. “Jesus and Maria, what a moron. Okay, Gilles? Gilles!”

“Yes?”

“We need to get out of here. How fast will your car go?”

He blinked at her several times while working moisture into his mouth. He finally asked, “How could this be happening...?”

She slapped him. Not hard at all, but enough to wake him up. He clutched his cheek angrily and said, “Hey!”

“Gilles: adapt. You gotta be faster than this, buddy.”

He blinked again, then nodded quickly.

“It moves fast enough, but it has only self-drive. I can't control it directly or violate the speed limit. We'll be sitting ducks rolling down the street at five miles an hour.”

“Shit...” Dora muttered.

“Plus I left the car in the driveway. I don't imagine we can get to it.”

Sigma emerged around the corner of the hallway, and she saw there were several scuff marks along his chest plate.

"WE MUST LEAVE. IT IS NOT SAFE HERE."

"Oh, you don't say?" Dora grunted. "We need to get to that car outside. Can you shoot back at whoever's out there?"

"I HAVE NO FIREARMS, MISS."

"You what?"

"THE HOPLITES WERE DISARMED WHEN THEY WERE DECOMMISSIONED, MISS."

"Well, that's great! What do you have?"

"LESS THAN LETHAL ARMAMENT, MISS. PEPPER SPRAY AND TASER."

She looked at Gilles, who only shrugged.

"Well, we need to get the hell out of here," she said. "What's behind this house?"

"Another house."

"Beyond that?"

"A street," Gilles said. "More homes. And before you ask, a few more beyond. It goes on like that until you hit the main drag into town."

"Okay... okay," she said. She glanced at Sigma, looked it up and down, and said, "Okay. We'll have to go out the back. We'll get a few streets over, going through yards or whatever, and steal a car—"

"Christ!" Gilles coughed.

"Relax; it's only temporary. It's just long enough to get to safety. You can make it right with the owner later."

She was interrupted by the sound of the door handle rattling down the hall. Dora and Gilles hunched in reflex while Sigma's turret rotated back in that direction.

"We need to move our asses," Dora whispered.

"Sigma, did you lock the door when you closed it?" Gilles hissed.

The turret did not spin to look at him, but the right arm lifted to present a thumbs-up.

Dora sighed in relief and whispered, "Thank God for that, anyway. Sigma, very quietly, we need to go through the backdoor. Can you manage that? Do you have some sort of silent mode?"

The turret now spun to look at her. "LET ME GO FIRST."

There was a beep and a series of clicks that issued from deep within the chassis, and then Sigma was moving toward the rear of the house smoothly and fluidly, the hard pads of its feet squeaking gently over the floor.

"Well, now I've seen everything," Dora whispered. She grabbed Gilles's hand and pulled him along.

They opened and passed through the door into the small backyard



quickly, Sigma ducking under the frame and then standing between them and the house, turret spinning madly in all directions.

Dora looked suspiciously at the fence and said, "Will that thing hold our weight if we try to jump it?"

"I don't know," Gilles said. "It's vinyl; pretty flimsy stuff."

There were more gunshots, this time louder as they all stood outside the house.

"CAUTION! EXTREME CAUTION! FOLLOW IMMEDIATELY!"

Sigma was off like a rocket across the yard, leaving the others to watch its passage. It bent forward as it approached the fence and plowed through to the other side like a bulldozer, blowing fragments of the cheap material in all directions. Dora and Gilles both flinched as the barrier was obliterated, then stood for a moment in shock. A moment later, Sigma's turret appeared around the side of the fence's remains, and it said, "FOLLOW IMMEDIATELY!"

Dora shook her head hard before shoving Gilles forward, and as they ran together across the yard, there were more gunshots. They had an in-between sound, as though they occurred within and without the home. Dora flinched, back muscles twitching, and shoved Gilles through the hole. She dived through after, followed by the sound of shattering glass.

"We gotta get moving!" she urged.

"FOLLOW! FOLLOW! FOLLOW!"

Sigma grabbed them both by the fronts of their shirts, and then its turret and legs rotated all the way around in the other direction. It began to drive forward through this new house's side-yard, moving so fast that Gilles nearly fell.

"Let go! Let go, you fucking tit!" Dora slapped at the metal hand bound up in her shirt, making a dull knock on each impact. Then she saw the approach of a wooden fence on the other end of the yard, and her eyes widened like dinner plates. "Oh, shit! Gilles! Hands up!"

He understood her meaning just in time; they both shielded their faces as Sigma dragged them through the wooden gate. Boards rebounded off their skin, stinging, and she felt the impact of the brick wall against her shoulder like a hammer. Her entire left arm went numb, and she noted angrily how Sigma had moved far enough to the left to spare Gilles a similar impact. As it continued to drag them across the front yard and into the street, she began to kick it repeatedly in the ass, having to hop on each kick to keep from falling.

"STOP THAT. YOU WILL HURT YOURSELF."

"You're going to kill us if you keep dragging us behind you, you dumb fucking—"

"Sigma, release us at once!" Gilles barked.

Sigma's hands snapped open, and they almost fell over again. It

had nearly been carrying them off the ground.

The turret spun back, and it said, "I MUST CONFIRM THAT YOU ARE WITH—"

Another gunshot, followed by a puff on the pavement and the sick whine of a bullet spinning off in a random direction. Lights were beginning to turn on all up and down the street.

Dora kicked Sigma in the ass again, shouting, "Get moving, dip-shits!" as she rushed past.

Gilles made to follow her and heard Sigma shout from behind, "WAIT! I MUST GO BEFORE!"

Gilles threw an arm and shoved Dora to the side. She yelled back at him in anger but was interrupted by the giant blur of Sigma driving between them like a wedge, huge feet banging off the pavement like pile-drivers. It blew through the next fence in front of them, and Gilles gasped, "I think he's figuring it out! Try to keep up!"

She scoffed and fell in close beside him as they squeezed through the gap.

They trotted through this new back yard, dodging past patio furniture and side-stepping a swimming pool. As they ran, Dora realized she heard someone on the other side of the fence that Sigma was about to blow through; he seemed to be yelling about the neighborhood kids and their damned illegal fireworks.

"Sigma! Wait!"

The Hoplite blew through the next fence like a battering ram, and she heard whoever it was on the other side scream. She sighed, gestured at the hole to Gilles with a throw of her hand, and as she passed through, yelled to any who would listen to, "Get inside your house and lock the doors!" She never knew if they heard or even if anyone had been there to hear. They were running through another jagged opening only a few seconds later.

Sigma was halfway across the street when they emerged into the front yard. Dora tightened her lips over a folded tongue and split the air with a whistle. Sigma halted and looked back, appearing somehow agitated for all its lack of expression.

"We can't keep at this!" she called, darting her head in all directions. There were lights coming on everywhere, now, and they heard people starting to call out to each other. "We've gotta get the hell out of here. Someone's going to be killed the way this asshole keeps shooting."

Gilles looked up and down the street. There were not very many cars out; most of them had to be plugged in overnight. Dora seemed to read his mind and asked, "Are there any normal cars?"

Gilles nodded quickly, still looking around. "Yes, they were grandfathered in. We might be able to find a gasoline car, in fact,

though I doubt it..."

"That's fine; all we need is something without self-drive."

"I CAN DISABLE SELF-DRIVE IF REQUIRED," Sigma suggested.

Gilles jerked in the Hoplite's direction. "Really?"

"YES. STANDARD SAFETY OVERRIDES."

"Fine!" Dora said. She pointed at a car some fifty yards away, said, "That one, then!", and began to run at it without awaiting an answer.

Gilles was able to keep pace with Sigma as they ran—or perhaps Sigma only paced Gilles—and they arrived at the vehicle just behind Dora. Gilles heard another one of those *blats* from Sigma, and all four of the doors swung open before they reached it. Despite himself, Gilles laughed at this and called out, "Hey, maybe he's not so much of a moron after—"

He was yanked back again by a tug at his shirt. He opened his mouth to shout at Sigma to knock it off, but Sigma blew right past him toward the car, and that pull was still there, dragging him backward. He looked behind to see the round-faced man, an ugly grimace deforming the thick cheeks and pale, gray lips. The face was enormous, like a pale, fleshy moon. Gilles made to scream, but the sound died in his throat as a blur of metal shot past the side of his head, impacted the man in the chest, and catapulted him backward twenty feet through the air. Gilles realized a second later that Sigma had punched him square in the chest.

The man with the round face had grunted when struck, the voice sounding high and feminine, but when he came sliding to a halt in the middle of the street, he made no further sound nor did he move. Gilles stood there staring at the body in shock while Dora ran back over to crouch beside it. Sigma walked up to join her and Gilles continued to stare. He was trying very hard to understand the import of what had just happened and found he could not.

"Dead," Dora said simply.

"YES."

She touched gently over the man's face, and Gilles said, "Don't touch him!"

She looked back and asked, "Why? You think he's contagious?"

The question disturbed him more than the body in the road, and he could only look at her. She shook her head in annoyance, stood, and moved toward the car. "We'd better get the hell out of here before this gets any worse."

Gilles looked on the body like a puzzle he could not solve. "I'd thought he was wearing a brown jacket, not a black one. Isn't that weird how the brain confuses things when—"

"Move your ass, Gilles!"

"PLEASE, WE REALLY MUST."

He shook himself out of the dream and began to walk toward the car. He heard doors opening and closing along the street. Gilles made himself move faster, hoping the owner of the car would not come along to shout at them, and Sigma wedged its bulk into the passenger side of the vehicle. Gilles, who had been moving in that direction, adjusted trajectory and got into the driver's side.

"I thought you'd need to be on this end," he said stupidly.

"NO. PLEASE FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS. I CANNOT DRIVE AWAY UNTIL YOU DO SO."

Gilles nodded, said, "Of course," and began to fumble with the belt. He could not seem to find the receptacle, and he realized his hands were shaking hard enough to rattle the pieces of metal together. Dora's hand came around from the back seat, took the belt, and inserted it into the buckle for him.

"Thank you..." he muttered. He felt a pat on his shoulder, and she said, "You'll be alright."

The car pulled away from the curb slowly. Gilles felt like telling Sigma to hurry up but realized the urgency had been mostly eliminated. Driving fast at this point would only earn them unwanted attention.

"I REQUIRE A DESTINATION, PLEASE."

"We must get to the police—"

"Hell no!" Dora shouted from the back of the car.

"Dora, we must—"

"No, Gilles! We just left a dead body back there. Going to the police is the last thing you do in a situation like this."

Gilles shook his head in confusion. "Dora... things aren't like that here. In this country..."

"This country is worse," she spat. "At least where I came from they were good enough to not pretend. This place pretends. It pretends to be what it is not. In the South, they are good enough to play straight and tell you that the attention of the police is the end of all things."

"That's crazy," Gilles laughed, "you can't really believe that. Sigma, take us to the police station."

"Don't take us to the police station, Sigma."

"Don't listen to her; the police station, please."

"Take us to a hotel, Sigma. Somewhere dark and quiet where the police stay away."

"Sigma..."

"Sigma!"

The turret whipped back and forth between Gilles and Dora several times as if it was broken, then froze in place.

"Sigma?" Gilles prodded.

A new sound issued from its chest; not a *blat* or a chime as before.

Something like the crackle of static. Sigma was silent a few seconds more and then said, "She has a point, Gilles."

"What?"

"WE WILL GO TO A HOTEL, AFTER WHICH I WILL MONITOR THE NEWS AND POLICE CHANNELS FOR INTELLIGENCE. WE WILL THEN DECIDE THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION."

"Good," Dora said. "Two to one."

Gilles looked back at her, then at Sigma. "This... this is not a fucking vote! Sigma, the police station! I order you to take us to the police station."

"I APOLOGIZE, GILLES, IT IS A MATTER OF SAFETY. I REQUIRE MORE INFORMATION TO ASSESS THE SITUATION."

Gilles clutched at the sides of his head and gasped, "Sweet Jesus!"

"Maybe you're not such an idiot," Dora said. She thrust her hand up into the front seat between them and asked, "Listen, Sigma, can you connect to these if no one's driving them? Maybe we can get some information on that nutcase."

Gilles looked down at her hand. It was open, and in the palms were a set of Lenses and the small, black nodes of two bone-induction speakers.

They found an older motel on the rough end of town that the local wildlife referred to sardonically as “The No-Tell Motel.” It boasted clean beds, hot water, and billing by the hour. There was a scrolling “Vacancy” advisory, and the place lacked a checkin desk; usually a bad sign but, in this case, it was the motel’s best characteristic. It still had a human cleaning staff, which was either a good or bad thing depending on who you asked. Most of them were imported from places like El Salvador or Venezuela to keep the costs down. They were cheaper even than the budget Capables (Cloud-driven Classical systems billed “as good as,” though they were not) and most people seemed to agree they did a better job. The beds were clean.

Sigma took the car on two slow circuits around the building while Gilles inspected the rooms and all the angles of the surrounding street lights. When he found a door that was fairly hidden and had a green light over the frame, Gilles said, “Okay, we’ll take 118. Sigma, we’d better go park this in a back-alley or something. Maybe three blocks over... but not too far, either. We’ll have to walk back, and you draw a lot of attention.”

“WHY MUST WE PARK SO FAR AWAY?”

“They’ll be tracking the vehicle; soon if they haven’t started already. There will be telemetry data.”

“INCORRECT. I HAVE DISABLED THAT FUNCTION.”

Gilles looked at the Hoplite and smiled faintly. “You can do that?”

“AS LONG AS I AM JOINED TO THE VEHICLE, YES. THE BEACON WILL RE-INITIALIZE AS SOON AS I SEPARATE.”

“Well, then we’d better stash it a few blocks away like he said,” Dora said absently. She eyed the doors of the motel sidelong.

“No, this can work. We’ll stash it here out of sight and pull the battery while Sigma’s still hooked up.”

Dora shrugged. “Fine, but you’d better pop the plates, too.”

Gilles cleared his throat and asked, “Wouldn’t that look suspicious?”

Dora continued to look out the window at their surroundings. “No one sees suspicious behavior here, Gilles.”

They backed the car into a gap between a rear wall and a dumpster. The hood popped loose and lifted, obscuring the view through the windshield, and Sigma’s turret spun to lock on Gilles. He

reached for the door handle, paused, and asked, “Uh, stupid question: do we have any tools?”

There was a moment where nobody spoke, and then Dora snorted in the back seat.

“Sigma?”

“I AM A HOPLITE.”

“But you don’t have anything like a wrench on you? Wire cutters or...or something?”

“*mechanic* IS NOT WITHIN A HOPLITE’S SKILLSET, GILLES.”

“Maybe there are some cutters in the trunk...” he muttered.

“What about this?” Dora asked. She thrust his kitchen knife into the front seat. Gilles stared at it and then turned to look at her.

“Really?”

“It’s a good knife.”

“Where the hell were you keeping it?”

She hit him on the shoulder and tossed the knife into the center console cup holder. “Will it work or not?” she asked.

He picked it up and turned it in his hands slowly. “Well... I can’t cut through the cable with it... but that doesn’t matter, I think. Give me a second.”

He got out of the car and disappeared around the front, leaving her with the giant toaster in the front seat. They waited together in silence and then two things happened at the same time, almost on top of each other. In the gap between the hood and the motor box, Dora saw a blast of sparks shoot up into the air like the magnesium sparklers they sold down on the border, and the car simply ceased to be. In the front seat, Sigma made a sound like a screaming cat. The noise cut off abruptly, so fast she wondered if it had been imagined, and she had only the ringing of her ears to insist it occurred.

“SORRY.”

“What the hell was that?” Dora demanded.

Gilles pulled open the door and asked, “How was that?”

“PLEASE NEVER DO THAT AGAIN.”

His smile was replaced with worry. “What happened?”

“I BELIEVE YOU SHORTED THE SYSTEM. PLEASE AVOID DOING THIS WHEN I HAVE AN ACTIVE LINK ESTABLISHED.”

Worry gave way to disbelief as he leaned further into the vehicle to look closely at the turret. “Does...Jesus, I can’t believe I’m going to ask you this—does it, uh, hurt?”

The turret rotated to lock onto his face. “THINGS DO NOT HURT, GILLES. THE CLOSEST WORD THAT MAKES SENSE TO YOU IS THAT IT IS JARRING. IT TAKES TIME TO DISENGAGE FROM MY END, AND AWARENESS SUFFERS.”

“How much time?”

“IT IS VARIABLE, BUT THIS PARTICULAR INSTANCE REQUIRED A 386 MILLISECOND RECOVERY INTERVAL.”

Gilles rolled his eyes. As he withdrew from the vehicle, he said, “That’s hardly worth mentioning.”

“THE PERIOD IS NOTABLE AND UNACCEPTABLE. PLEASE DO NOT—”

“Fine, yes, fine, Sigma. I’ll make sure not to short a set of battery terminals the next time you’re connected to a car.”

Sigma got out of the car, and Dora felt like she raised an entire foot off the ground. She got out as well and saw Gilles looking carefully around the lot. She followed his gaze but could not see what held his interest.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

He pointed across the lot with his chin and said, “See that beam from the street light around the side of the building?”

“Yeah.”

He crouched down in front of the car’s grill and started working at the plate cover with the knife. “Okay, see how the corner of the building is throwing a shadow across the beam?”

“Yes.”

“Stay in the shadow.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s not just a beam,” he said. “There are eyes in the street lights.”

She looked back at the obscured beam and shuddered. “Jesus, what a sick country.”

“Have you not been here long?” He crossed the lot to the motel wall and hugged it around the corner without awaiting an answer. She shared a glance with Sigma and then followed, the steps of the trailing Hoplite vibrating through her legs.

They came around the corner to find Gilles staring down at the door’s card reader, the knife and license plate clutched in his hand.

“Problem?” she asked.

He nodded. “I can’t use my VID. If we’re trying to lay low... well, they’ll be looking for that. We could use those Lenses you pinched earlier, but I imagine they’ll be looking for that, too, given how Sigma murdered him, and all.”

“THAT WAS A JUSTIFIED—”

“Keep it down!”

“THAT WAS A JUSTIFIED MEASURE.”

“Anyways,” Gilles sighed, “I don’t actually have a way to pay for this that can’t be tracked. It doesn’t have a cash slot, but that doesn’t matter either. I’d have to go withdraw it to have it, and then we’re in the same spot.”

Dora pulled a square of plastic from her hip pocket and said, “Try this.”



Gilles turned it over a few times in his hands and asked, "Do I want to know where this came from?"

"You think your house was the only one I popped?"

He slumped his shoulders and looked back at her. "This is from one of my neighbors?"

"Hey, do you want to sleep in a bed or a ditch?"

"God. How long have you had it? There's a good chance they've reported it."

She shook her head and said, "Nah. They were away on vacation."

"Fred Josephson?" he asked.

"Yeah, that's right. You know him?"

Gilles shrugged a shoulder and swiped the card. The light over the door switched from green to red, and the door swung open.

"Yes. He's somewhat of a dick."

He held the door open as the others entered, then closed it and engaged the chain and double-bolt. Sigma stumped over to a corner opposite the solitary bed, extracted a cable from his leg, and plugged into a wall. Dora watched as he did this, mouth hanging open, and then began to cackle wildly.

Gilles looked between her and the Hoplite and asked if she was alright. She threw a hand at Sigma, gasped, and laughed, "He just plugs into the fucking wall! It's...it's too much! I can't...!"

"Well... what else would he do? It's not like they're solar powered."

She continued to laugh as she maneuvered around the bed and pointed at the plug in the wall. "Yeah, but look at it! It's ridiculous; it plugged itself into the wall like a damned lamp! Ah-haha haha!"

"I REQUIRE ELECTRICITY TO CHARGE, MISS. ONE HUNDRED-TWENTY VOLTS AT SIXTY HERTZ IS AN ACCEPTABLE INPUT."

She collapsed onto the bed, laughing even more. "Stop it! Oh, Jesus, please stop!"

Gilles looked at her as she lay there laughing, and after a while, she saw him. She saw his eyes and stopped laughing, the sound dying away as it fell down the well of her throat. He dropped the plate and knife onto the table at the window, went over to the sink, and turned on the hot water with the archaic handle. He thumbed the rust stains idly as he waited for the water to run clear. When it did, he slipped his hands under the stream, waited a long time for it to warm, and then ran a handful over his face and through his hair, and he worked to ignore her presence, but it was a hard thing. Her presence was a hard thing as she stood behind him now.

There had been no cruelty in her laugh, yet the existence of her laugh had been enough.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"We killed that man."

She sniffed. "Yes, but he was trying to do us as well."

"But we did kill him."

"It happens."

"No, no it does not happen. I've managed to make it very far without it happening. Most people manage to go their whole lives without it."

He saw her nod in the mirror but could not see her face. There was a single lamp back in the sleeping area, and the distance to the sink was asking too much of the dying, little bulb. "You have it easy here."

"It must be insane where you come from if it's only the abstention from killing that's considered easy."

"No," she said. "It is very sane. They see things for what they are and respond in kind. They're not crippled by feelings nor do they allow the feelings of others to govern their lives. They keep to themselves and do not inflict their feelings on others. Here, you will allow people all the way on the other end of your country to decide things based on feelings, things that will change how you live, and they'll have no idea who you are. You don't know each other, but you'll let them decide how you will live. You have no idea who they are if they are good or bad, intelligent or a foolish, and you'll let them say what you can and cannot do. You do this and call it sane."

"You haven't any laws?" he asked.

"Oh, we did. But we understood there were many that were foolish and we were sane enough to ignore the foolish ones. It's an agreement, sanity. Just as insanity is an agreement, and you have all agreed together to be insane. Where I came from, if a man chased after you in the street and tried to kill you, the sane thing was to fight him and kill him instead. The law says we're not supposed to do this but what should we do? Follow some law made by a stranger or keep living? So everyone agrees. Kill the attacker quietly, make him go away, and leave the law out of it. Police understand this in the South very well, and look away, but if they happen to see that's not so bad either, because you can pay them to look away again. The police are very good about leaving the law out of it when it makes sense to do so, and it doesn't cost much. And law is only confusion, anyway. It's a thing created so that strangers can control other strangers. Is that a thing that sounds good to you, Gilles? Strangers running your life?"

"What if you can't pay the police to look away again?"

"Eh," she said. "Only the very stupid allow the police to see, anyway. It's usually the stupid that have money, and if they have none, they deserve what they get. You need money when you're stupid. It's an expensive lifestyle."

"It isn't a thing that's done here," he said.

“Clearly. You’re not a sane people, but I don’t hold it against you.”

There were two towels on the rack. He smelled each and used the one that seemed the cleanest to pat his face dry. He hung it back up and turned to look at her, but her face was still dark. He opened the door to the bathroom and turned on the light, bathing the right side of her face so that it was a mask of dark and light. Her skin was like gold, and the eye he could see was shrouded under a deep epicanthic fold.

“How old are you?” Gilles asked.

She cocked her head as if the question was pointless and then shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“Nope.”

Gilles continued to look into her face; its full lips. The bridge of her nose was shallow, nearly unformed, and the hair that started brown at the crown of her head became blonde down at the hairline as if it sought to match her skin and her golden, glowing eyes. In a distracted voice, he said, “You could be fourteen or twenty-four.”

She shrugged and said, “There was no one there to tell me.”

“And you speak both Spanish and English,” he said.

She smiled. “And Portuguese, too.”

“You had school?”

She laughed at this and returned to the bed. She stretched across the top cover and laced her fingers behind her head.

“Please get up,” he said.

“What’s the matter?”

“Just... please get up.”

Concerned, she sat up and scooted off the edge. He advanced, and she backed away from him, but he passed her and went straight for the bed. He took the top cover in his hands, tugged it away, and threw it in a corner. Then he gestured at the exposed blanket and said, “Okay. Go ahead.”

She was obviously confused but shrugged and climbed back on to lay down. Maybe closer to fourteen, then, but that made no sense either. It sounded as though her life had been hard. She should have understood why he would pull the coverlet off at any age with a life as hard as she described.

“How far back can you remember, Dora? How many years?”

She thought it over and said, “It’s not really a thing I think very much about. I seem to recall that at some point everything just starts at once. And before that, nothing.”

“You mean your memory?”

“Yeah,” she said. Her eyes traced out patterns in the popcorn ceiling and she pointed up at a blotch in the corner. “That one looks

like *Memín Pinguín*...”

“What?”

She glanced at Gilles and rolled her eyes. “Nothing.”

He looked up at the ceiling a moment. It looked like a regular expanse of yellowed popcorn to him. “What's the first thing you can remember?” he asked, still looking up.

“Running. I was running down a street in another city. It was a dirt street, and I heard laughter chasing after me. It was older laughter, and I didn't like it. Sometimes you hear laughter, and it makes you want to laugh too, but this was not the way for me. I did not like this laughter.”

“Were there other people on the street?”

She nodded. “A few. It seems very early in the morning.” Her voice had detached from her body like a departing soul.

“Were they very much bigger than you?”

“No. They were larger, mostly, but not very much.”

“And this is your first memory?”

“I... think so.”

He leaned forward in his chair. Something chittered at the back of his mind, and he remembered suddenly that he had lately been a party to a murder. The knowledge came back to him in a sick wave that washed through his stomach like sewage. She was talking again, though, so he swallowed it down and listened.

“It seems like... there was something before. I don't have any details. It's like there was a bright light overhead and much movement all around. Very much...”

“Dora...?”

*“Personas en abrigos. Abrigos blancos que eran largos. Me tocaron und fragten viele beaucoup de questions...”*

“Dora.”

She blinked and looked over at him.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

She stared at him blankly a moment, then asked, “Who would want to kill you?”

It took him a while to catch up, having not expected the question. He thought about it and said, “I can't think of anyone.”

“No one?”

“Well, not now. Once... maybe. There are a lot of crazy people out there, as you've indicated, and at one time, many of them took a shine to me.”

“What's so special about you?”

“You've heard of Guardian?”

She nodded. “Of course. We laughed at the other countries when they took it up. You really are a crazy people, you know that? In the

South, they watch you in the open. They watch you, and it's very clear you are being watched. Nobody lies, and it's good, and then if you have money, you can give it to them to make them stop watching. It all makes sense; it's all very civilized, and everyone understands how it works. Here, they lie about watching you, and everyone knows it's happening anyway, but they still pretend to do it in secret. Everyone agrees to pretend, here, and they couldn't stop watching you even if they wished. Crazy."

Gilles cleared his throat and said, "Yes, well. I may have had a hand in it."

"Guardian?"

"Yes.

"Oh," she said thoughtfully.

"I may have been the head guy on it."

"Oh."

"Yes."

She thought a moment and then nodded. "Definitely crazy."

"Anyway, there were a lot of people who were unhappy with me, but it's been a long time, now. I've been forgotten about."

"Someone hasn't forgotten."

He said nothing to this. It was an uncomfortable feeling. He thought about Annalise and was glad for the first time that she was no longer alive.

"Someone is less crazy than you, I think."

Gilles sat up and stared at her. "What?"

"The one who hasn't forgotten. That's another thing about you people; you forget everything. You can't pay attention to anything for very long, and you forget it all when you stop paying attention."

"That's not true," he said.

"Oh, sure it is. It's what makes you so easy to rob."

"And what about you? You seem to have forgotten everything before adolescence."

She tilted her head and nodded without shame. "That is true. Maybe I'm a little crazy, as well. But once the memories start, they sure don't stop." She sighed.

Gilles rubbed his palms over his thighs and looked at Sigma. The Hoplite had not moved or even indicated it was listening through the entire exchange. "Sigma?" he asked.

The turret spun to lock onto him. "YES?"

"Sorry. I was just checking to see if you were still here."

The turret turned again in a slow arc. "IS IT NOT OBVIOUS?"

Gilles shook his head and looked away. "I need to go to the police..."

"We talked about that already," Dora said. "It's a dumb idea. A

crazy idea.”

“Only to someone who comes from an insane country,” Gilles muttered.

“Exactly.”

“And what about you, Sigma?” he asked. “You sided with breaking the law; Christ knows why. We’re in a safe location, now. Are you ready for us to all evaluate this and figure out just what the hell we’re going to do?”

“Turn on that ratty TV,” Dora suggested, waving a hand at the unit on the wall. “Check the local news stations and see if anyone’s talking about it.”

“I suppose. TV on.”

The screen stayed black, and Dora laughed. She rolled across the bed, grabbed the remote control from the side table, and tossed it at Gilles.

“Wow,” he said, turning it over in his hands. Then he pressed the power button and started thumbing through channels. He eventually found what he was looking for and set the controller on the table. He settled back into the chair, resigned to sit through the opening half of the news report, which was always just a review of the latest viral Cloud videos. They watched for a while in silence; the long parade of shouting personalities; the feel-good videos of children behaving as adults; the humorous videos of adults behaving as badly as children; those who hurt themselves, intentionally or not; the various animals doing adorable animal things; the screaming politicians overlaid with cynical graphics and snappy one-liners.

Dora looked over at Gilles. He met her gaze and then turned to watch the TV through her eyes.

“Crazy...” he agreed.

She sat up on the bed and patted him gently on a kneecap. “Welcome to the party,” she smiled. She got up and moved to the door.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Dinner. I’m hungry. Keep an eye on the cat videos, and I’ll be back in a bit with some food.”

“You shouldn’t,” he said. “They’ll be out there looking for us.”

She opened the door. “Don’t worry about it. I won’t be seen.”

“Do you have money?” he called after her.

Her laughter was cut off by the closing door.

He had never been a great drinker, but Gilles imagined he now understood what it must be like to have done or said things in a state of inebriation that were soon forgotten in the following sobriety. Giddy dismissal; disbelief; rejection; dawning horror.

Eventually, acceptance must come. Acceptance is the true terror. Acceptance defines the point at which one realizes it is not the story of his friends that is unreliable but the story of his mind. The story of the mind is the thing that is false; it lies like an enemy. Only your mind, the most intimate part of you, would lie like an enemy, like a lover, protecting against the shame of what you had done. A hindered mind doing the best it could with what it had left.

And then the world found you the next morning and gave you the truth.

Gilles watched the news story play out on the television and experienced these things; only acceptance never came. He had never been a great drinker. He had been a sober man in the strictest sense for years, knowing that he must exist either in sobriety or alcoholism, not both. He knew he could not straddle the line between and Annalise would be heartbroken to see him become an alcoholic. On the off-chance she was still in a place where she could see, he abstained.

The thing on the television made him feel very much an alcoholic. It made him feel an alcoholic in all of the ways that were bad and none of the ways that felt good—the delightful, tooth-buzzing laughter and the warmth of the skin along her back.

“THIS APPEARS TO BE AN INACCURATE REPORT.”

Gilles snorted. “You think so, do you?”

“THIS SCENARIO DOES NOT REQUIRE A GREAT DEAL OF THOUGHT, GILLES.”

“Uh-huh. Still think we shouldn't be going to the police?”

Sigma's chassis creaked as it shifted against the wall. The turret rotated to look at Gilles, and he noticed for the first time that there was more than just the blinking red light. He saw what appeared to be an array of black sensors wrapped around the front of the turret in a thin, segmented band. He wondered idly if these covered more than the visible light spectrum.

“IT SEEMS TO ME OUR CURRENT PATH IS REINFORCED.”

“Reinfor... how so?”

“WHEN WE DID NOT HAVE THE BENEFIT OF THE NEWS FOOTAGE, THERE WAS NO WAY TO KNOW HOW YOUR STORY WOULD BE PERCEIVED BY THE AUTHORITIES. WE DID NOT KNOW WHO WAS AFTER YOU AND IF HE ACTED ALONE. MISS DORA HAD A GOOD POINT—IT DOES NOT HURT TO REMOVE TO A TEMPORARY LOCATION AND EVALUATE THE SITUATION, AS WE HAVE DONE. THE REPORTS ON THE MATTER MIGHT HAVE SUPPORTED GOING TO THE AUTHORITIES. THEY DO NOT. THEY HAVE INSTEAD PRESENTED DAMNING EVIDENCE LIKELY TO SEE YOU INCARCERATED INDEFINITELY. I CANNOT ALLOW THIS. I'M SUPPOSED TO BE DEPOSITING YOU TO THE ANAGNORISIS LAB IN NEW YORK.”

The breath ran shallow in Gilles's chest as the inner workings of his mind went tissue-thin and brittle. “Sigma... you would take me there against my will, wouldn't you? If I wanted to turn myself in... you would stop me.”

“GILLES, PLEASE UNDERSTAND. MY ORDERS ARE EXPLICIT. I AM TO PROTECT YOU AT ALL COSTS FROM ALL MANNER OF HARM AND DELIVER YOU TO THE INTENDED DESTINATION. YOUR LOSS OF FREEDOM, ESPECIALLY UNDER FABRICATED CIRCUMSTANCES, IS ONE FORM OF HARM.”

He saw that his hands were shaking again. He flexed them into fists and filled his lungs to capacity several times. “You might as well package me up in a box and load me onto a flatbed.”

“THAT IS HARDLY A WORKABLE SOLUTION. IT IS SURE TO DRAW ATTENTION. ALSO, YOU MUST BE ABLE TO CONSUME NUTRIENTS AND EXCRETE WASTE, TO SAY NOTHING OF HYGIENE. BUT IT IS GOOD THAT YOU ARE NOW APPLYING YOURSELF TO SOLUTIONS. CONTINUE TO DO SO, PLEASE.”

Gilles placed his head in his hands and groaned. Sigma watched him do this for some time and, when it was obvious Gilles would do nothing else, straightened to begin sweeping the room with his turret. He proceeded to monitor the area for another twelve minutes and forty-eight seconds before identifying a footstep pattern consistent with Dora's gait. Thirty seconds later she tapped at the door. Sigma observed passively as Gilles went to open it.

She entered the room carrying a plastic bag stretched to bursting in her left hand. With it came the warm smells of meat fried in oil, beans, the crispness of lettuce, the earthiness of rice. Gilles's mouth began to water as soon as he smelled these things and she squeezed past him to set the bag on the table. The boxes and cups within settled lazily and spread along the surface with the sounds of rustling paper and foil. Gilles glanced outside to look into the shadows but saw nothing. He was unsure what it was worth, that he saw nothing, but



he shut the door and fastened it anyway. Dora was already seated at the table arranging various parcels over the surface. She pointed at the opposite chair with her chin and said, "It's best when hot."

He sat down and looked at the feast with his mouth open. "Where did you get all this?"

"Down the way."

He looked at her. She was tearing into a hard-shell taco as if it was trying to escape.

Looking down at the various Styrofoam containers and bags, he asked, "Well, what's in all of these?"

She smiled. "Don't know. Pop open a few lids and see."

"You don't know?"

"It's part of the fun, Gilles. Everything is a surprise."

He closed his eyes and sighed. He understood.

"Did anyone see you coming back here?"

She settled back into her chair and looked at him with an aggrieved expression that said he was being an insulting ass.

"Of course, how could I even ask? My apologies."

Dora nodded, said, "Eat," and resumed savaging her food.

She finished off two more tacos before he found a container full of beans and rice that looked and smelled delicious. Dora tossed him a small package of flour tortillas when he popped the lid. "Didn't grab any forks," she said through a mouthful. "Roll those up like a shovel. You ever use a piece of toast to push your eggs around? Like that."

He nodded self-consciously and did as she advised, making only half the mess he thought he would. He found he could make a ball of the stuff by stirring a wad of beans up in the rice and then worked the entirety of the mess onto the end of the tortilla. He sucked the ball from the end in a most indelicate manner and was struck by the deep savor in his mouth. Dora watched as he did this and laughed at him as he chewed.

"What?" he asked, smiling.

"Bite the end off, Gilles. Don't suck it like it's a pito."

He looked at the end of the now slimed tortilla and began to laugh with her. "Yes, it is rather pathetic, isn't it?"

She gestured at the plastic bag by his elbow and said, "That's why you get a lot of them."

They ate in silence a while, somehow forgetting Sigma's foreboding presence and the long sweep of his turret. After a few minutes, Gilles began to clear his throat repeatedly, and Dora nodded. "Sorry, that's the grease. I couldn't get anything to drink. We'll have to take a mouthful from the sink."

Gilles eyed the faucet across the room, and she said, "It's fine. Just let it run until the water stops being orange. Did you see anything on

the news while I was gone?"

Gilles sighed and dropped the remainder of his tortilla onto the bed of rice. It folded open into a crescent moon as he looked over at the black television screen and scowled.

"There was a story covering what happened. It, uh... it appears I'm wanted for murder."

Her eyebrows raised as she said, "That didn't take long. I thought they'd at least take some time before they called it a murder. Circumstances weren't so cut and dried."

He looked down at his food and nodded sadly.

"What is it, Gilles?"

"Give me a moment. It was nice not having to think about it when you came back. It was nice just being able to eat."

"Finish your food, then, and tell me."

He pushed it across the table. "No. I've lost my appetite. They had footage. There was a Guardian camera installed somewhere along that street, though I don't know where. I don't recall there being a street light in the position that the camera appeared to be. Maybe they're installing them in other things; I don't know. I didn't even think they had the cameras in my neighborhood."

"Why not?" asked Dora.

"Because. It was a nicer area. The people who lived there did better—"

"You mean they *were* better."

"No, I didn't say that. There just wasn't any crime in the area. It's a waste of money to put Guardian hot spots around there. Why would you install cameras to watch for a thing that never happened?"

"You're assuming they only watch for crime?" Dora asked.

"What else would they watch for?"

"Don't be dense," she scoffed. Then, looking at the portion he had pushed away, she asked, "Are you eating that?"

"Help yourself."

She slid it over and went to work. "So they have some video. Okay. They were going to know you were involved anyway when they traced all the wreckage back to your place and saw the state of things. It's about what we knew it was before, right? They still can't be trusted; we should still lay low. I don't understand why you're so—"

"Dora, the video didn't show what happened."

She went very still at this. "What did it show?"

"You weren't there. Neither was Sigma. In the video they played on the news, I walk up to the car and break out the window. Then the man who was chasing us rushes in from off-camera and makes a grab at me. The feed ends when I pull out a gun and shoot him several times."

Her face had changed from confused to disbelieving as he explained. When he finished, she shook her head and said, "It doesn't make any sense."

"Well, of course not, it's pretty goddamned far from what happened!"

"No, that's not what I mean. I didn't see any activity out there when I was getting dinner. We're not that far from your house, Gilles. Nobody's talking about it. I didn't see one cop. Down South, when someone is stupid enough to leave a body, the police are forced to acknowledge what has happened and then they must make a great show of pursuing justice. They put barricades at all the major streets and go door to door to shake the people around and demand answers. They get very angry that someone has botched a killing so bad that they must be involved and they do a careful job of looking for the one who caused the trouble. This is where I come from, where we've given up on pretending, and not here, where pretense has been turned into a national pastime. I saw no police out there, Gilles. Nothing like what I've described."

"I see."

"Is it that different here? Are the police quiet because of all the cameras? Are they just relying on the cameras to catch you?"

"I don't know," Gilles admitted. "It is possible."

Dora shook her head. "What a sick country. Okay, put that aside. What about the video? It obviously shows a thing that didn't happen. How can this be?"

Gilles shrugged helplessly. "I haven't a clue."

"None at all? You built the damned thing, didn't you?"

"That's why I don't have any idea, Dora. There was no part of the system I devised that would have allowed for tampering. The feed, visual and audio, is encrypted at the camera by the DSP. This all happens in firmware, so there isn't any way to push an upgrade to a unit that dismantles the feature. We used AES-256 as the encryption algorithm with keys updated every eight seconds."

"The keys are how you unlock the data?" Dora asked.

"Yes. Do you know much about computer systems?"

She shrugged. "They still have ATMs with older card readers back home. If I can lift a card, I know enough to get money out. It's not really something I've been able to use here with the VIDs and all."

"I should think not. So, encryption is basically just scrambling data so that it can't be read. When you do this, you need a key that gives you the ability to unlock the data; to unscramble it. If you don't have the key, you can't unlock the data."

"What happens if the wrong person gets the key?" she asked.

"Well then they have access to all the data, but that can't happen

here. The Guardian system used to be susceptible to this weakness when we first built it because we had to store the keys on both ends—the camera and the servers. Keys were updated from server to camera at a regular interval, and then we needed some way to secure the transfer of the key codes as well. And if anyone gained access to the keys or figured out how we generated them, the whole thing was compromised, and we had to push a massive update. All of that was rectified when the SC systems came into play. One of the things a quantum system does really well is code-breaking; it's just an ability that is inherent to its nature. So when the Super-Capables came online, we integrated them with Guardian and upgraded all the drones, and then later the static cameras when the drones went the way of the dodo. The main advantage this bought us was the ability to discard the encryption keys at the camera. The data was just encrypted, sent along, and the key was left out of the transaction because an SC doesn't need it to begin with. It can just grind the encrypted data without them.”

Dora thought about this a minute, and Gilles waited for the flurry of questions to follow. It was a familiar experience whenever he tried to explain the more technical aspects of his work; people would nod, blink, and stare off into the distance, having understood nothing of what he had explained and afraid to admit their ignorance. They would either ask dozens of irrelevant questions, or none at all and the whole conversation soon became a tangled mess.

Instead of asking questions or nodding in a confused stupor, Dora said, “So, you throw away the keys, and the wrong people don't have a way to hijack and decode the data at a later time. The keys don't exist anywhere so the data just can't be decrypted.”

“Yes... exactly,” Gilles said. He was impressed.

“But the SC the data goes to can decrypt it without the keys?”

“Correct.”

“So... encryption doesn't work on SCs for some reason?”

Gilles shrugged and said, “Not quite. There are certain forms of encryption they can't crack. Lattice cryptography, for example. But it would be pointless for us to encrypt the Guardian data to a level they can't crack. We want it to be encrypted just enough, you see. Just enough so that average systems and people out in the world would find it useless. Sigma, for instance, runs on a quantum core, however he would not be able to decrypt a Guardian stream simply because the activity of his core is dedicated to the running of his high-level functions. He doesn't have the capacity to devote to it. None of the Capable systems do; it takes a lot of power to make these things think.”

“How many of these SC systems are there?”

“Three that we know of, all owned and operated by Anagnorisis Technologies.”

“That you know of?” she asked.

“Well... Anagnorisis has several contracts with the US government. You know how it is.”

“No, I don't, Gilles. Explain it.”

“The government always wants its own toys, you see.”

“Ah,” she said. She leaned back in her chair and stared at Sigma for a while. Continuing to stare at the Hoplite, she asked, “Do regular people in this country have access to the SCs?”

“I understand what you're getting at—that's good thinking, but no, they do not. They have access to lesser quantum computers, but only via the Cloud. A quantum system is still expensive as hell to manufacture. Anagnorisis is the only company that's figured out how to do it on any large scale, and they still have patents on everything, so that's a closely-guarded industry secret. The quantum systems that you can play with over the Cloud are really just curiosities, and you still have to VID in to use them, so the activity is always tracked. If you want to do anything serious you have to lease time on one of the Anagnorisis systems and you don't even want to know what that costs. They have a bit of a stranglehold on things right now.”

Dora continued to look off into the middle distance as she thought. Finally, she muttered, “Someone figured out how to do it.”

“How's that?”

“Someone figured out how to decrypt that feed. It's the only way they could have changed it to show a lie. We need to figure out who did it and how.”

Gilles sighed and shook his head. “I just said I have no clue. I can't think of anyone with the necessary access and desire to do it. Plus, they'd have to convince one of the SCs. Remember: an SC isn't just a computer that follows instructions blindly. They're intelligent, thinking systems. If an SC were to crack a Guardian stream in the manner you suggest and be discovered, it would be shut down immediately. Anagnorisis could afford to do nothing else. And for an SC, a shutdown is basically death. You wouldn't be able to convince one to knowingly do something to threaten its own existence. The drive for survival has been hard-wired into the lowest levels of the system.”

“Somebody figured it out, Gilles. Someone found a way to make it happen. If someone figured out a way, there's a way to find out who. That's the only way this gets any better.”

“IF I MAY INTERRUPT, MISS DORA?”

They glanced at Sigma as if he had suddenly appeared out of thin air. “Yes?” she asked.

“IS THERE A WAY TO ACCESS THE FOOTAGE BEFORE IT WAS DECRYPTED?”

She looked at Gilles expectantly.

He thought a moment and said, “Everything is archived locally at Anagnorisis's server farm. Data is retrieved, decrypted, and reviewed on request by the SCs. You need a court subpoena for decryption, though; it's the only way we could get compliance with privacy laws given... ahem... given that feeds are also pulled from Lenses.”

Dora's mouth fell open. She closed it soon after and shook her head slowly. “Sick,” she muttered.

Gilles shrugged and said, “It was something they did after I left the project.”

She closed her eyes and shuddered. “Okay... okay, you need the court order to get the data decrypted. You can have an SC pull it at any time, though?”

“Yes. There are internal audits all the time to confirm the integrity of their archival storage, so they have the ability to confirm that it is there and intact. You need a date, time, and a specific geographic location, and the SC can pull all related data corresponding to that index.”

“So that's it then,” Dora said. She clapped her hands a few times and snapped the fingers of her left hand in a throw-away gesture, as if she tossed a pinch of salt over a shoulder.

“What's it?” Gilles asked.

“You need to go pull that archived data. Get your hands on it, then turn yourself in to a news agency somewhere. Make sure you get all kinds of backups sent out all over the place, give an interview or whatever to a few reporters, and then call the police up to come get you. You'll have enough of that data out there that they won't be able to ignore it. At some point during your trial they'll have to decrypt it, and then everyone will see the truth.”

Gilles looked down at his hands as they flexed in his lap. “You make it sound very easy. It's a hell of a gamble, relying on footage I've never seen.”

“Oh, then you did shoot the guy?”

“Of course not.”

“Good. And you're certain of your super, kick-ass encryption?”

“To the degree which I have described, yes.”

“You know what happened. If the system works as you've said, if you're really as smart as you think you are, then the footage shows the truth, doesn't it?”

“Well, it still shows that we killed a man...”

“It shows that you defended yourself against an assailant.”

“But you're trusting the legal system to see that. I thought you

didn't trust any of them?"

She smiled, and in her smile, he saw the grit of a country left behind. "You trust them when you have leverage, Gilles. The trick is to get enough leverage that it's easiest for them to let you go, yet not so much that it becomes better for them to make you disappear. It's a fine line, but it can be walked."

"Jesus Christ. I don't know, Dora. I just don't know."

"Do you have anything better, Gilles?"

He did not, of course.

He was awakened by her absence the following morning. The emptiness of the room pulled him along to consciousness like a river current, and he felt through his back that the set of the mattress was incorrect for her body. The mattress was the first thing to tell him she was not there. He looked around the dim room, at the jumble of wrappers on the table, at the hollowness of Sigma's immobile form. Those senses that were available to him during sleep reminded him now that she was not in the bathroom. The motel room was cold and empty like a cast-off husk.

He sat up and scooted to the foot of the bed. He remained there a while, blinking his eyes clear, and ran a hand through his hair to lay it down. His clothes felt stale and clung to his body. He began to regret not taking Dora's advice, which was to disrobe and cocoon himself in a sheet if he felt so precious about sharing the bed with her. He would not hear of it and after he saw her deposited beneath the blankets, lay down on top of the blankets on the edge of the bed, perching there on his shoulder and hip like a bird. She had laughed at him and asked if he was queer.

The little room had been filled with her mirth when she said this like she could fill a space with the essence of herself without trying, and when he did not answer, the mirth leaked away until only discomfort remained. Finally, she was very serious and asked, "What is it?"

"I am making this as right as I can. The more time I spend with you, the more I watch you, the more I'm convinced you could be my daughter."

"Hardly. You're hardly that old."

"No, if I had made a mistake very early in life it could be so."

"I'm a mistake, huh?"

"Stop it. You know what I mean. Say a younger sister, then."

She was quiet for a long time, and he started to think she was sleeping. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder, and she said, "It isn't that. You're thinking of her, aren't you? The woman in the hallway pictures?"

"Please go to sleep, Dora."

"I'm sorry I called you queer. I didn't mean it. I'm sometimes harder than I want to be."



“It's alright. The word is insulting. To be accused of its definition is not. Go to sleep.”

“I'm sorry anyway. I guess after a while, you get used to men wanting to stick it in you. It's like everything, like the whole world. The whole world and everything in it wants to stick it in you. When you find someone who doesn't want to do it, you look at them like they're the broken one and not everything else. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I laughed.”

“Go to sleep, Dora. Please.”

---

He knocked the sleep from his eyes as he stumbled to the wash basin. He turned on the bathroom light and examined himself in the mirror, the stubble patching his face and disheveled hair. There were more wrinkles around the eyes and in the cheeks than he liked to see. It seemed there were more wrinkles in these places every time he looked. He turned on the faucet and told himself the wrinkles were from sleeping hard.

“When did she leave?” he asked.

“ONE HOUR, FORTY-SIX MINUTES AGO.”

Gilles splashed some water on his face, and his shoulders pulled up high from the icy shock. He shuddered and asked, “Where did she go?”

“I DO NOT KNOW.”

“You didn't ask?”

“I DID NOT.”

“Why, Sigma? Why wouldn't you ask?”

“HER WHEREABOUTS ARE NOT MY CONCERN. YOU ARE MY CONCERN, GILLES.”

He shut off the faucet and leaned against the sink. When his frustration was sufficiently bottled, he said, “I see. Sigma, what if she had decided to go to the authorities and tell them where we are? After last night's revelation? Suppose she decided that killing is a crime too great to live under and thought she could secure immunity by informing to the police.”

“OH...”

“Indeed, Sigma. 'Oh.'”

“YOU BELIEVE SHE WOULD DO THIS?”

Gilles thought a moment and said, “Honestly, I don't. She's taken everything so easily; her attitude and so forth. This all feels like it's very normal to her.”

“THEN YOU ADMIT IT IS UNNECESSARY TO KEEP APPRISED OF HER MOVEMENTS.”

He sighed and said, "Sigma... you will guard her like you guard me, do you understand? You will do so, or I'll do everything I can to sabotage your little mission.

"AT THE RISK OF YOUR OWN FREEDOM?"

Gilles forced his hands to relax. "Yes."

"I SEE."

"Good, Sigma. That's good. I'm going to have a shower now."

He removed his clothing and draped it over the air conditioner in hopes of blowing out the dankness of last night's panic and the grease of the final meal, which had excreted through his pores as he slept. He crossed the room to the shower naked, subconsciously assigning to Sigma the agency of a family pet. He found in the bathroom that there was no soap or shampoo. When he checked the sink under the basin and found it likewise empty, he rolled his eyes, understanding that water alone must do the job. The water was hot, at least, after it ran for several minutes, and he passed his hands over his body as he stood beneath the showerhead, trying to push the oils down and away. The hardness of the water helped in creating the illusion of cleanliness, causing his hands to stick and drag.

He noticed the shower curtain twitch as he worked. He pulled at the edge of the plastic and a roach as long as his thumb scurried up the material, darted along the curtain rod, and ended finally up in the corner where two walls met the ceiling. There it remained, eyeing Gilles balefully. Its presence did not bother him. He felt as if this were a place made for its presence and that he was now a creature made for this place. Together, they had equal claim, and one should not seek to supplant the other.

"Easy, old man," Gilles muttered. "A moment, and then I'll be out of your life."

It was a deep truth he felt. That morning, all things felt deeply true.

He dried off with a towel so threadbare it was transparent and was surprised he actually felt clean. The process, or perhaps it was the water itself, had a freshening effect, and when he crossed the room to retrieve his clothing, he was straighter than before. He pulled on his clothes, bracing at the touch of the chill fabric, and tying his shoes wished bitterly for a toothbrush.

"YOU MUST WEAR THE LENSES, GILLES."

"No. I won't be connected to their system."

"YOU WILL NOT BE. YOU WILL BE CONNECTED TO ME."

"I'm sorry?"

"I HAVE LEARNED THAT WHEN YOU SAY YOU ARE SORRY, WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS IS THAT YOU REQUIRE FURTHER EXPLANATION. IS THAT THE CASE NOW?"

“Jesus... yes, it is.”

“I WILL PAIR WITH THE LENSES AND FUNCTION AS A PROXY BETWEEN YOU AND THE CLOUD. ALL BEACON, TELEMETRY, GUARDIAN, ADSENSE METRICS, AND SIMILAR TRACKING DATA WILL BE ARRESTED AT MY FIREWALL. I WILL HAVE THE ABILITY TO FORWARD INFORMATION TO YOU AND ROUTE DATA REQUESTS FROM YOU OUT INTO THE WORLD. IT ALSO AFFORDS ME THE ABILITY TO TRACK YOUR LOCATION AND STATUS AT ALL TIMES.”

He looked at the tiny, pearlescent domes on the dresser by the television. They stared up at the ceiling like dead fish eyes and straining his vision he could see the inner whorls of fine white filament like the spinning valleys of a fingerprint. There they would lay, as lifeless as their previous owner, until the lysozyme in his tears quickened their inner workings.

“Those were pulled from the eyes of a dead man,” Gilles said in distaste.

“RUN THEM UNDER THE FAUCET.”

He snorted at the Hoplite's practicality. He wondered if he could reasonably advance further argument but decided ultimately to let it go. The advantages were beyond dispute.

He scraped them carefully into his hand and held them under the running faucet at the basin. As water ran through his fingers, he said, “I'm not familiar with the care of these things. Will it damage them if I scour their surface with a fingertip?”

“NO. THEY ARE QUITE RESILIENT.”

“Good,” he said and began to agitate them between his thumbs and index fingers. As he worked, Sigma came up from behind him to watch his actions in the mirror. Gilles glanced up at his own reflection, looked at the form towering over his right shoulder, and rolled his eyes.

“THE PROCEDURE IS TO SPREAD THE UPPER AND LOWER LID OF THE EYE WITH ONE HAND WHILE THE OTHER, BALANCING A LENS ON THE PAD OF A FINGER, TAPS IT IN.”

Hands formed of metals and composites rose in the mirror and pantomimed the activity Sigma described, gingerly as though he wanted to do the job for Gilles personally. Gilles stared at Sigma's reflection until the hands dropped out of sight.

“SORRY...”

“Alright.” He pushed the door to the bathroom open wider to get as much reflected light into the area as he could manage. In response, two LED flood beams popped from Sigma's shoulders and blinded him.

“Jesus—fuck, Sigma!”

“APOLOGIES, GILLES. I HAVE REDUCED BEAM INTENSITY FOR THIS ENVIRONMENT.”

Gilles blinked into the mirror, trying to squeeze away the purple blotches that hung in his vision like fat, sick insects and said, "Start on a low setting next time, can't you?"

"APOLOGIES."

"Christ, I'm certainly glad no one was trying to kill me. I'm starting to think Dora was right; you are a goddamned toaster."

"SINCERE APOLOGIES."

"Ugh." He blinked into the mirror some more, and it soon transpired that the blotches had spread over to one side so that he could see on the other. He rolled his eyes around in their sockets hoping things might improve, but they did not. "Fine. Here we go..."

He spread the lids of his right eye and moved the Lens toward the pupil. It required a few minutes to get the first one seated; he kept blinking when it came into contact, and the thing would fold over on itself like a shaved flap of skin. Then he would have to dig it out, wash it again, and prod at it until it opened back up. His eye watered like a sprinkler and tears ran freely down his cheek. He went through three such of these sequences, cursing profoundly until he had the right Lens in place.

"GOOD," Sigma urged, "NOW THE LEFT ONE."

"Could we not just use a single Lens? There are people who use only one."

"THOSE ARE SPECIALLY MADE. A SET OF TWO ARE CALIBRATED TO OPERATE AS A SET. IF YOU HAVE ONLY ONE, YOU WILL ONLY HAVE HALF OF THE INFORMATION."

"Hell. Fine." He fiddled with the other, soon panting in frustration and shaking his hands out wildly to keep from putting a fist through the glass of the cheap mirror. He hated how irrational those damned things made him. As he blinked his eyes wildly, praying the left Lens would slide into place, he fantasized about tossing them into a shredder.

"I have them, I think. Here, can you see?"

He turned and looked up at Sigma's turret as though stretching for a kiss, and after a few seconds the Hoplite said, "YOU APPEAR TO HAVE FINALLY SUCCEEDED."

Gilles laughed through a wry sneer and said, "Great. It feels like I've jammed soup bowls into my eyes. So, now what?"

"THEY HAVE BEEN DORMANT FOR SOME TIME. YOU MUST WAIT FOR SUFFICIENT ABSORPTION TO—"

"Whoa, there they go. Something's happening now..."

His field of view was interrupted by a gauzy disturbance, not so much static as a transparent overlay like green tissue. It faded slowly, and when it was gone, only a single pinprick of green remained. He stared at it in wonder. It seemed to hover at a distance impossibly far

away, yet he felt he could reach out and touch it with his hand; felt as if it floated only a foot away from the bridge of his nose. It was so small it nearly vanished, but it was as clear to Gilles as the sun in the sky; the illumined tip of a micro-fine needle that lived within his mind. He looked about the room and found that the pinprick moved with his eyes, floating away to rest on the far wall, rushing up close to dance over the back of his hand.

“DO YOU SEE THE RETICLE?”

Gilles nodded slowly. “Yes. It's quite amazing. I've had it described to me before but... I'd never realized how it truly appeared...”

“GOOD. I HAVE ARRESTED INITIALIZATION AT THE START OF THE BOOT CYCLE, WHICH IS WHY YOU SEE ONLY THE RETICLE. I MUST NOW MAKE SOME ADJUSTMENTS TO THE LENS'S FUNCTION. PLEASE STAND BY...”

There was a green flash like the explosion of a nuclear chemical fire, paralyzing in brightness, yet he felt no pain. The glare diminished rapidly, darkened, and then the room darkened. It continued to darken until he hovered in a pure black void.

“Sigma... Sigma, I can't see!”

“YES, THIS IS EXPECTED. PLEASE STAND BY...”

“You might have warned me, you obtuse fuck!”

“I DID SAY ADJUSTMENTS NEED TO BE MA—”

“*You will go blind, Gilles!* The proper fucking warning is to say *'You will go fucking blind, fucking Gilles!'*”

“YOU WILL GO FUCKING BLIND, FUCKING GILLES. IT IS TEMPORARY.”

Gilles felt around with his hands until he found the dresser and began to step across the room in search of a chair. He grumbled as he went, “Clueless walking malfunction of a woman's personal goddamned massage device. Gormless piss-pot with legs; you'd be better served as an amusement park animatronic!”

“NOT SO, GILLES, I AM CAPABLE OF ONLY SOME OF THE FUNCTIONS YOU HAVE SUGGESTED.”

“Oh, shut up, and let me know when I'll be getting my sight back, ass.”

“APOLOGIES, GILLES, DID YOU WISH ME TO SHUT UP OR TO INFORM YOU WHEN—”

“*When I have my sight back, damn you! Say when I'll have my sight back, son of a bitch!*”

“UNDERSTOOD. PLEASE STAND BY...”

The loss of sight yielded to sight's discovery, fading in slowly, and where the darkness left, behind it shapes remained.

“YOU SHOULD NOW BE REGISTERING VISUAL ACTIVITY.”

“Yes, it's coming back now.”

“AS ANTICIPATED. I HAVE SUCCESSFULLY PAIRED WITH YOUR DEVICE AND HAVE DISABLED A NUMBER OF BACKGROUND FUNCTIONS INTENDED TO RELAY DATA BACK TO VARIOUS CLOUD-BASED SERVER INSTANCES. THOSE FUNCTIONS THAT CANNOT BE DISABLED HAVE BEEN BLOCKED. YOU MAY NOW SAFELY USE YOUR LENSES.”

His vision had cleared back to normalcy.

“What happened to the reticle?”

“NOTHING. IT IS STILL THERE.”

“I can't see it, though.”

“THE SYSTEM IS FULLY CALIBRATED. YOU MUST LOOK FOR IT NOW.”

“What?”

“YOU MUST FOCUS AS THOUGH TRYING TO SEE IT. THE MANUAL SUGGESTS LOOKING AS IF YOU ARE TRYING TO SEE IT THROUGH A FOG.”

Gilles did as suggested and, after a few seconds, saw the green prick of light on the far wall. “I'll be damned,” he breathed and allowed it to dissipate. He practiced this new talent a few times, learning how to bring it back and make it go away whenever he pleased.

“How the hell do they know when I want to see it?”

“THE ACT OF LOOKING FOR IT CAUSES THE INTERNAL STRUCTURES OF YOUR EYE TO MOVE IN SPECIFIC WAYS. THE MUSCLES OF YOUR LIDS CONTRACT. THE LENSES ARE ATTUNED TO THESE MOVEMENTS AND INTERPRET YOUR DESIRE ACCORDINGLY.”

“This is so normal,” Gilles said. “I was always under the impression there was constant noise...”

“TYPICALLY THERE IS. THUS FAR I HAVE BLOCKED TWENTY-SEVEN POP-UPS FROM DISPLAYING.”

“Twenty... seven? You're joking.”

“I AM NOT. THERE ARE HIGHER TIERS OF SERVICE IN WHICH SUCH ADVERTISEMENTS ARE ELIMINATED. MANY USERS OPT FOR JUST RECEIVING THE POP-UPS AND DIALING SYSTEM TRANSPARENCY TO A MAXIMUM SETTING. IT DOES NOT MAKE THEM GO AWAY ENTIRELY, HOWEVER.”

“Well, okay. Thanks for blocking all my spam, then. So what can these things do besides make me blind and scare the shit out of me? How do I control them?”

“FUNCTIONS THAT CAN NOT BE INTERPRETED VIA EYE MOVEMENTS ARE CONTROLLED THROUGH VOICE. PLEASE ATTACH THE SOUND NODES NOW.”

Gilles retrieved the small, black nubs from the dresser and looked them over. They were each half the size of a fingernail. “Stick them anywhere?”

“ANYWHERE ON BONE. FEEL BEHIND YOUR EAR FOR THE HARDEST POINT WHERE THE SKIN IS MOST THIN. PRESS THE DERMAL CONTACT PAD OF EACH NODE AGAINST THE SKIN AND APPLY MODERATE PRESSURE FOR THIRTY SECONDS. YOU SHOULD FEEL SLIGHT HEAT AT THE CONTACT SITES. WHEN YOU DO, YOU ARE FREE TO LET GO. THEY WILL BE SECURELY AFFIXED IN PLACE.”

Gilles did as instructed, noting in a distracted fashion that the heat behind his ears made the bend of his neck feel loose and comfortable. He removed his fingers and looked at Sigma.

A voice in the center of his mind said, “Can you hear me, Gilles?”

He jerked in his seat, nodded, and muttered, “Christ...”

“Excellent,” said the voice. “All systems online.”

“Why do you sound different over the nodes?” Gilles asked.

“It's because I'm being piped directly into your head through bone conduction. Your skull transfers lower registers and bass more efficiently, so that's what you hear most.”

“Okay, makes sense,” Gilles said. “Same reason my voice sounds terrible in a recording.”

“Note, also, that you needn't speak at full volume to communicate with me. You may speak with me as always; however, whispering will also be picked up and interpreted correctly.”

Gilles nodded. “Okay, great. So now I have it all set up. What do I do with it?”

“The primary intent is for me to monitor your status at all times. You may request information of any sort, however. As an example, here's an overlay of an area map...”

His vision was screened by a top-down street map of the surrounding city, centered on the motel room, traced in lines of finest glowing green. Small, flashing beacons with name tags floated slowly along the streets, and he soon realized these were other Lens users. Gilles looked over the map and discovered he could scroll it around if he stretched his vision far enough.

“My God...” he whispered. “These things are incredible.”

“Yes, they're quite good for Augmented Reality applications, as well.”

“It's too bad they're monochrome,” Gilles said. “I understand the full-color Lenses can do VR as well.”

“Yes, but they're almost prohibitively expensive,” the voice thrummed. “Give it a few more years.”

“Can this be done in 3D?”

“Of course. I'm controlling the rendering. I can present the information however I choose.”

The lines of the map tilted away from him, flattened, and spread out in all directions. He stood from his chair, stumbling a bit as he

looked through the motel walls into the rendered world beyond, mouth hanging, turning slowly in a circle. The wire mesh of the digital world remained anchored in place, and he saw the thin, green outline of streets, the edges of buildings, and even the movement of vehicles. Every street he focused on presented its name, every building its address and business, and when he focused on the slow-moving beacon of a pedestrian, an overlay materialized showing names, age, place of residence...

"I'm seeing a lot of personal information," Gilles said. "Way more than I should have access to."

"Yes, I'm providing you with elevated permissions."

"I don't like it..."

"I can understand your misgivings, however it's critical to maintain this elevated level of awareness. We need to keep you alert to your surroundings as well as the people sharing them with you."

"I see," Gilles said. He was distracted by a new flurry of noise on the overlay, the presentation of which was unfamiliar. Just through the wall, within the parking lot outside, he saw explosions of concentric circles like rapidly spreading ripples in a pond. They were large and moved over the ground rapidly, then came to a stop between two beacons marked as vehicles. The pulsing circles disappeared and then reappeared shortly after, only now they were small and began to float toward him at a slower rate.

"Sigma... Sigma what the hell am I seeing? You're rendering this, right? You know what it is?"

"What you're seeing is a detected presence not connected to the Cloud. Lens users do not have this capability; it is something I'm providing to you exclusively through the interpretation of my own sensory data. The rapid expansion of concentric circles is how I've chosen to represent an *echo*."

"An echo...?" The circles had stopped outside the door.

"Yes. What I'm showing you is all based on sound, after all. You needn't be concerned over the person outside. The movement pattern and audible signature suggest that Dora has returned."

A knock sounded at the door.

"Just a minute!" Gilles called. Then, in a lowered voice, "How was she moving so quickly a moment before?"

"She was in some sort of vehicle. The vehicle itself is not connected to the Cloud, so I assume she retrieved an older model."

"Son of a goddamned bitch," Gilles groaned. He yanked the door open, shocking Dora, and said, "You stole another car?"

She stood blinking at him and then asked, "How the hell did you know that?"

"Get in here," he waved. He tried to slam the door behind her, but



the hydraulic arm pulled it up short, causing it to shut with an unimpressive click.

She passed into the room, arranged herself at the table like a queen, and began to pick at the leavings of the previous night with little interest. He watched her, expecting an answer, and when she gave none he sat down in the other chair and said, "Well?"

"I'll answer you when you apologize."

"Apolo...!"

"Yes. I was out this morning risking my neck for you, not counting feeding you last night, in case you forgot. I'll remind you that I can disappear at any time, and now that we know that I don't even show in the footage they have on you, I'm beginning to wonder why I don't do just that."

Gilles folded his arms across his chest and asked, "Why don't you, then?"

She looked at him a moment and then shook her head. She selected a stale tortilla chip from a Styrofoam box and nibbled the end thoughtfully. Then her eyes narrowed, and she leaned forward in her chair. She studied him closely and said, "You've put them on."

He looked back at Dora, unsure what to say, and as he watched, those exploding concentric circles formed again, issuing small and proud from the center of her chest in a deep rhythm. He thought of a time before when he had searched for a heartbeat as a compulsion—the dearest sound in the world—how he would place his ear against her back as she slept and just listen to that beat for as long as he could until sleep found him. He looked away from Dora and asked, "Do they look very bad?"

"They make you look like everyone else. It is very good, and I dislike it."

He shrugged. "I'm sorry for earlier. I was worried. That you have stolen a car alarmed me. Why would you do this? We have one already."

"The one I got us is very old. It is in good condition and will run, which is nice, but it is very old. We call a car like this an *Abuelo* because it was grandfathered in. All the newer vehicles must be traceable, you see? The *Abuelos*, though. They may stay old. It's good for us. Any of us can drive it in case something happens to the toaster —"

"I PROVIDE FOR SEVERAL FUNCTIONS IN EXCESS OF A TOASTER."

"—and we won't need him around to keep it off-Cloud."

"I see. Gas or electric?"

Dora sneered. "Gas, of course."

"That'll be tricky. Gas is not cheap."

"It has a full tank. We can drive it empty and get something new

after. It's better not to hold onto it very long. Someone loved this car; it will be reported soon, if not already."

He considered what she had said for a moment and then pulled back a corner of the curtain so he could see outside. "Which one is... oh. Jesus Christ."

"There's something wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. No, nothing at all. I'm sure a red race car with a giant Hoplite in the front seat won't attract any attention at all. Completely inconspicuous. God, what year is that thing?"

"2015 or 16, I guess."

"THE AUDIBLE SIGNATURE OF THE VEHICLE AS IT APPROACHED WAS CONSISTENT WITH A CHRYSLER HEMI ENGINE, HELLCAT VARIANT."

Dora nodded at Sigma and smiled, "Good ear."

"Oh, yes," Gilles repeated. "I won't draw any attention driving that thing at all."

"Not so fast, buddy," Dora laughed. "Can you drive a stick?"

"Well... no..."

"Then I guess you won't have to worry about drawing attention driving it, will you?"

He looked at her suspiciously and asked, "Do you have a license?"

"No, but I can drive a stick. Don't get bent out of shape; it was the only one I could find. Trust me, I would have been happy with something more timid. The only people hanging on to gas vehicles anymore are collectors or the poor, though, so the selection gets limited. Besides, we don't want you up front, anyway. They're looking for you, not me. We'll stick you in the back. Sigma can ride passenger..." she glanced at the Hoplite, then looked up at the turret as if gauging his height, "...we'll have to slide the seat as far back as it will go, I guess. We'll recline it all the way back. Anyone looking in from the outside will see only me."

Gilles glanced out the window again, grimaced, and let the curtain fall back into place. "It's still going to stand out. You said the owner was likely to make a thing over this...?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, but police always drag their feet on stolen property if the car isn't chipped. I think they feel like it's the owner's fault for not upgrading. Anyway, it won't be a problem immediately. I swapped out the plates with someone else's car. That won't be reported for months, if at all. No one ever notices their plates were lifted if you replace them with another set. I put some tape over the VIN, too, so your fancy little cameras out there can't see."

Gilles became pensive as he thought it over. It made him nervous; yet another weight added onto a growing pile. He felt within his mind as though he balanced a mountain of rubble in his outstretched arms,

leaning this way and that to prevent it from toppling, and new things kept being stacked at the top. That Hemi outside was another stacked thing. He tried to recall the last time his guts had not been a churning mess and found it a challenge. It seemed he had felt this way since before he could remember.

“So we need to get that feed data,” Dora said through a mouthful of cold rice. “I’ve been out solving the car problem all morning. Your turn, now. Solve this.”

“I need to make a call,” Gilles said. “I know someone who can get access. If we’re lucky, we don’t even have to leave this spot. I’ll get in touch with him, give him the timeloc index, and he can upload it into data escrow.”

“We should leave,” Dora said. “That car we boosted last night is still out in the lot. We should take the *Abuelo*, head out of town, and find a new place. You always want to keep moving if they’re looking for you.”

Gilles cleared his throat in some discomfort and nodded. “Fine, then. We, uh, we probably don’t want to cross state lines, though. I understand laws get complicated when you do.”

Dora laughed, her voice a high symphony, and said, “You’re a little beyond that, Gilles. Do you recall? You’re a murderer, now.”

“The hell I am. I’m getting clear of that just as soon as I make that call...hey, Sigma, is it still safe for me to call out with these things?”

“YES.”

“Good. So, as I said. I’ll get the murder cleared. There’s still everything else that needs to be settled up. Stolen cars, property damage. I’m not giving anyone more ammo to use against me. I’ve seen prosecutors become real assholes over such things.”

Dora nodded. “This is a good point. I’ve seen it as well.”

“Sigma? How about that call?”

“PLEASE PROVIDE THE CONTACT INFORMATION FOR THE PERSON YOU WISH TO REACH.”

Gilles recited the information as requested, then jumped when Reggie’s overlay materialized at the bottom-left corner of his vision. He was distracted by this, craning his neck around and looking at various points in the room, amazed at how well the overlay maintained its position, like a physical entity anchored to his eyeball. It seemed incredible to him how similar it was to the old VR games from his youth. The experience was intuitive and effortless. He suspected it was why the technology had become so ubiquitous, and all it had cost was the public’s final shred of privacy, which they seemed not to be using in any case.

“Hello? Hello, who is this and how may I help you?”

It was Reggie’s voice, only it was Reggie’s voice inside of his head.

It was richer, more resonant. Gilles wondered if this was how Reggie heard himself.

“Reggie, it’s me.”

“Gilles! Holy shit! Who the hell is Corban?”

“Corban?”

“This pop-up says I’m talking to a guy named Corban.”

“Oh, right. Umm, forget about that now, okay? Listen, it’s obvious I didn’t arrive last night. Have you seen—”

“Have I seen? Are you kidding? You’re all over the fucking news right now! Is this real? It can’t be, right? I don’t want to believe my eyes.”

Gilles closed his eyes and became distracted again when he discovered the world map overlay along with Reggie’s contact card were still visible. Christ, but with enough practice, he could get around in the pitch dark with these. “It’s not real, Reggie. This is some sort of setup. Someone out there seems pretty pissed at me.”

“There’s video, though.”

“Yes, there is, and you know exactly how much that’s worth anymore. Honestly, Reggie, how long have we known each other? Does this seem even remotely possible to you?”

“No,” Reggie admitted. “No, I can’t say it does.”

Gilles opened his eyes and started breathing again. He saw that Dora was sitting on the edge of her seat staring at him, looking the way people do when they eavesdrop on one half of a conversation. He looked away to keep focused. He had enough sensory input as it was; her golden eyes were too much.

“You’re suggesting someone infiltrated the Guardian data, then,” Reggie stated.

“Yes. I need you to pull the archives for me. I have the timeloc index. The main thing is that I need it to be the encrypted feed, fresh off the DSP—”

“I can’t, Gilles.”

His throat locked shut, killing the rest of the words he had. He tried to regain his footing but felt within the pounding of his mind that all of the ground that ever existed had washed away.

“Reggie... man... I know how we left it but... this is so critical... it’s the only way I’m going to prove...”

“No, Gilles, you don’t understand. It has nothing to do with all that. Believe me, if I could do it I would. All remote access has been revoked. They locked us out this morning.”

“Oh...shit. Oh, shitting Christ...” He did not care for the way his voice sounded, whether inside his skull or not. It had a waver to it like fabric decayed in a desert wind.

“I know, Gilles, I know. I wish it were different. The only way to

get what you need is to go to the archives.”

“Anagnorisis,” Gilles muttered.

“Yes.”

“What is it?” Dora demanded. “What’s wrong?”

“Who is that?” Reggie asked.

Gilles waved her away and said, “It’s nothing. It’s the TV; I’ve just muted it.” He flashed his teeth in a snarl and dragged a finger across his throat. Dora’s face flushed angrily, but she said nothing more.

“Where are you, Gilles?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“Fine, don’t say. Are you safe, though?”

“I think so.”

“Good. Look, what if I get on a plane and head out to—”

“No.”

“Gilles...”

“No, Reggie. No chance. Already I’ve been shot at and chased across my neighborhood. If someone finds out you’re trying to—”

“THERE’S SOMEONE AT THE DOOR, GILLES.”

A knock sounded from behind, slow and metered out like a metronome. Gilles looked past the door into the overlaid world and saw a nameplate that said only “Belen.” There was no surname nor any other data to go with the name.

He stared at the surface of the door, at the strange plate floating beyond, at the green wireframe of the outside lot. He closed his mouth and swallowed hard.

“Reggie, I’d better call you back...”

“Hang on—!”

Gilles nodded at Sigma, and the call terminated. He patted the air with his hand to signal they should all be quiet, went to the door, and looked out the peep-hole.

The dead-eyed glare of the round-faced man looked back at him, fish-eyed through the distortion of the peep-hole. The wind leaked out of Gilles in a soft “*heeehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...*” He wanted to warn the others but lacked the strength.

Dora was standing behind him now, he felt her there like a warm ghost, and she whispered, “Who is it?”

Through the peep-hole, Gilles saw the man reach into his jacket, and the dead eyes never wavered. Gilles thought he might forget that face completely as soon as he looked away, but eyes such as those could never be forgotten. The way they looked through that hole, it made him feel like he was seen, like he was seen by all the eyes of the world, and all of those eyes had decided he must not be allowed.

“Gilles? Who is it?”

The man with the round face pulled a pistol from his jacket and

pointed it at the peep-hole.

The muscles along Gilles's back bunched as he turned and he could feel the heat of that pistol on the other side of the door, pressing. She was looking at him, wide-eyed, as he dove past her and pulled her down with him, falling slowly through the air, back muscles tight and shoulder tightening, waiting for the floor to come up and strike them, waiting for the bullet that carried his name, waiting for the hallucination of Anna's ghost to fade and be replaced with Dora, only Dora.

He heard her grunt on impact, and the voice was hers. It was her voice, and he was relieved. He managed to catch her head with the meat of his arm, protecting it from bouncing. Her hands were clutched up in his shirt like she wanted to throw a punch but when she looked into his eyes her hands loosened up like wet rope, and she opened her mouth to speak. The first bullets blew through the door before she could say anything.

They closed their eyes together, and he pulled her in, tugging at her shoulder with his right hand and curling his left arm to bring her face to his chest, and as he tried to shield her, he wished to be a heavier man. The skin and bones of his body felt inadequate, very much so, as they lay together on the floor with the glass shattering over the sink and the wood chips and dust drifting down to rest on them like a blanket. More shots came, continued to come, came at a speed that surprised, and Gilles looked back at the door to see each new hole walking down its length like the steps of invisible feet. He held his breath and tensed, and he felt Dora tense against him. He wondered if she could tell it was coming or if she only responded to the motion of his body, wondered if tensing would help it hurt less when it came, the way it helped to tense before being struck along the body.

He clenched his eyes shut and felt the passage of air over his length, like the wind of a speeding car felt from the curb. The whole side of the motel wall thundered, and he was convinced the side of the building was coming down on top of them, that enough bullets had come through to undermine the structure, before he realized it could not be. Only the door was shot up; it simply could not be. Then he heard the sound of panging rattles, like pots and pans being smashed together.

He opened his eyes and saw the bulk of Sigma filling the entire door frame. Within his mind, the Hoplite said, "You must get to the car! Quickly, before he starts shooting through the window!"

The clanging continued.

Gilles looked down at Dora, still balled up on the floor trying to cover every part of herself with her arms and hands, and he brushed the hair from her face. She looked up at him and then squinted back toward the door.

"The window in the bathroom!" Sigma urged. "Fast!"

"What about you?" Gilles hissed.

"I'll track your progress. As soon as you're through the window I'll occupy him so you can get to the car. I'll catch you up. Go!"

The shooting paused a moment, and the world became as quiet as Gilles had ever heard in his whole life, quieter than the final time he reached for Anna's hand and found it empty. Then the glass of the window exploded, and the curtains began to jump wildly, and the room came alive again in a spinning fury.

"Now!" Sigma sent.

Gilles got to his knees and pulled at Dora, sliding her body along the carpet until she got a leg under and stood, and then she was dragging him along as he dragged her, dragging each other, plunging ahead to the darkness of the bathroom door, while the far wall vomited fragments into the air and the glass shards sparkled in the light, and the blinking light of Sigma's turret followed.

The bathroom window was large enough to allow their passage, but the glass itself was meshed with a fine web of steel... or something that looked like steel. Dora grabbed the plunger from the corner, stomped the rubber cup from the handle, and stabbed it into the glass like a baton. It skittered along the glass's surface without leaving a mark. She cursed and stabbed at it again, several times, quickly, and on the last strike, a crack webbed over the mesh.

"Sigma!" Gilles shouted. "We can't...!"

The Hoplite shoved through the doorway. He did not take the time to turn sideways as he came through, and the jams on each side suffered the consequences, splintering from the frame as if made of paper. Gilles and Dora shielded their eyes as Sigma's arm lashed out, punctured the window's membrane, and then showered the bathroom with shards as he yanked it all from the wall. Gilles turned to shove Dora through, but Sigma held them both back and said, "NOT YET."

His foot caved out the sill, opening the whole thing up like an explosion, and then he was urging them forth, saying, "HURRY! EXTREME CAUTION! HURRY!"

Dora went through first, followed by Gilles, and as they rushed down the back alleyway, they heard more such explosions coming



from behind. They were explosions that were not explosions; sounds of such violence that Gilles could only define them as the sounds Hell made. It was cars ramming into each other on the highway, thunder splitting the sky, buildings collapsing to the pavement. It was louder than his ears could hear, louder than his brain could understand, and it was all behind him, all happening right behind him.

He leaned ahead toward Dora and shouted, "The car! He said for us to get to the car!"

He saw her head nod before she reached back to take his hand.

She had parked the car across from the door to their room. When they neared the edge of the building, she inched the last few feet slowly before peeking around the side. She put the sliver of an eye around the side and saw only the emptiness of a quiet parking lot. She looked back at Gilles, who stood there blinking, and then she edged out into the open. Coming around the side, she could now see what had once been their front window was now a great hole in the side of the building with a few shreds of curtain spilling out. There was a smattering of glass shards all over the concrete below the window, and the explosions had stopped. It was quiet enough in the lot to whisper.

The door to the room right next to them cracked open. Dora hissed and ducked. She felt Gilles's hand squeeze down over her own, but he was not strong enough to hurt her. A head poked through; the frightened face of a dark-eyed woman. They heard the small voice of a crying child coming from within.

"Go back!" Gilles hissed. "Lock the door!"

The dark-eyed woman shook her head at them.

"*Vuelve adentro,*" Dora tried. The dark-eyed woman gasped, and the door slammed shut. She yanked Gilles forward, pulling him nearly from his feet, and they legged across the lot to a car she now very much regretted. It stood out to her eyes like a great, bleeding asshole, and after all the noise she wondered if they could escape without anyone looking very hard at them. It would be very bad if people looked at them in a hard way, in a way that burned details into memory. It was all very bad, and she cursed the car, herself, and the feet that had carried her there.

They crouched low and hustled along. When she gained the car, she unlocked and opened the door, shoved the seat over, and crammed Gilles into the rear. Then she was in after him, and the Hemi engine screamed to life. She could feel the thing bucking to life through the pedals, and she yanked the knob over to reverse. They were moving in a hard arc, the force of the movement so great she could not close the door; could only hold onto it, and then when they stopped the thing slammed shut on her arm and jarred hell out of her

shoulder.

“SIGMA!” Gilles hollered. He reached into the passenger seat and lowered the window, screaming again, “*SIIGMAAA!*”

The Hoplite burst through the window like a bounding jungle creature, loping, hitting the ground with scraping clicks, pumping with metal arms in a way so human that Gilles almost saw panic in the turret. Gilles threw the door open as Sigma came on, and when he neared the vehicle, he dug his heels into the pavement and showered the length of the car with sparks. He fell into the passenger seat, body grinding through the door frame, knees up as high as he could get them, and when Dora dumped the clutch, Gilles felt their back-end slide leftward by three feet before the tires hooked and shot the car forward like a cannonball.

The passenger door slammed shut from the momentum and Sigma, turret jammed into the roof while the rest of him ripped up every inch of upholstery, stabbed at the seat controls until he reclined all the way back. Gilles had enough time to yank his legs out of the way before they were pinned.

“Did you kill him?” Dora yelled. The car bottomed out as they launched from the lot, barfed a shower of sparks across the street, and all the passing self-drive cars squawked and blatted indignantly, scattering like roaches to avoid their passage.

“UNLIKELY. HE HAS SUSTAINED ONLY ONE MILLION VOLTS AT TEN MILLIAMPS.”

“Only!” Shouted Dora.

“It’s not that bad,” Gilles yelled from the back. “Was he knocked out when you left, Sigma?”

“YES. I WAS PREPARING TO RESTRAIN HIM WHEN YOU SHOUTED.”

“Shit, you should have finished the job!”

“Never mind,” Gilles said. “Get over to the right, you’re pulling way too much attention in the self-drive lanes.”

“Yeah, hang on,” Dora said. “I’m waiting for a gap...”

“Turn your blinker on. They’ll open up for you.”

She did so, and a path to the rightmost lane materialized. As they began to drift in that direction, Gilles saw her eyes widen in the rearview mirror. She yanked on the near-prehistoric shifter knob, and then the engine was screaming again, rattling the teeth inside of his skull.

“What the hell!” he shouted.

“A million volts of whateverthefuck turns out to be less than you’d hoped!” she yelled back. The car swerved like a drunk man beginning to tumble, and Gilles was jarred up against the inside wall, head bouncing, and he wondered if the crash he heard had been his skull or something outside the car. “*Get the fuck outta the way!*” Dora

screamed, and it sounded to Gilles as if her throat had split open.

He clawed his way up the back seat to look through the rear window. The street and the buildings that walled it in stretched out behind them to a point that vanished beyond the clutter of city life, and somewhere within the noise of movement was more movement, a discordant note, the feel of colliding panels and sparks and smoke and chaos. Bubble-shaped cars tiny in the distance weaved in new-panicked arcs, awakened rudely by the thing driving up their middle, pushing them out at all sides on an invisible wave rolling forward like a tsunami, and at the heart of that tsunami was the intelligence of those little vehicles, the inner-workings of their collision-avoidance systems shifting into overdrive.

He saw a black sedan plowing a furrow up the road and shouted, "Good Christ, he's coming!"

"Yes, I'm aware, Gilles! You really want to buckle up!"

She yanked on the knob again. The car lurched beneath him and then screamed forward, throwing him into the backrest, and shook violently under deafening explosions as it jerked first left and then right. The pebbled glass of the side windows blew across the interior and then his world became the call of a cyclone, howling into his ears like a shrieking demon. The engine screamed to drown out the shrieking, they combated one against the other, neither winning out, and Dora added her own voice to the storm, sounding small and far away. She slammed the knob, the car lurched, and Gilles soon detected the smell of an unclean burn. It was a smell from long ago, an odor that brought to his mind the image of sickly, yellow-green smoke, and he realized it was something he had forgotten. He had not smelled it in years, not since people had stopped jamming on their brakes to avoid rear-end collisions.

The smell burned the inside of his nostrils, and he understood that Dora was laying down rubber.

He grabbed her headrest and pulled upright, fighting to yank one leg out from under Sigma's bulk, which had wedged beneath the seat somehow, and looked again through the rear window as he fumbled with the belt. A line of abused vehicles trailed in their wake, jammed over to the roadsides with their caution lights popped and rotating in wild, orange shimmers. Up the center of the destruction drove the sedan, the great black pursuer. Gilles peered at the windshield, fighting to see past the glare to the face he knew must be inside, the round, forgettable face.

"He's gaining!" shouted Gilles.

"I know!"

The sedan swerved out to their driver's side as it neared and Dora, seeing it, drifted in this direction to cut it off. The sedan's grille

dipped toward the pavement and Gilles was rocked as bumpers collided. The Hemi's rear axle broke loose and slopped side-long to the right until they pointed nearly sideways. His hands clenched down hard, his arms clenched, his entire being clenched and locked rigid as they slid, and he watched Dora's shoulder heave as she spun the wheel, saw her right hand feather-light over the shifter knob, and heard the pulsing grind of the engine as she goosed it forward. He heard her screaming, and it still sounded so far away.

The wind rushed around his head, and he heard the screaming of the engine in his heart and the screaming of Dora in his mind, and he felt the shredding of his own screams in his throat and through his teeth. He looked out the left window and saw the shining grille of the sedan bearing down, and he thought he heard the shriek of that engine, too, coming to end them. He shouted, "Dora...!"

From the corner of his eye, her right hand dipped. The tires underneath seized the road, snatched the road up from itself until they had all of it, every fucking inch of it, and the back-end whipped out like a lash. They blasted forth like a low-flying rocket, and Gilles caught a suggestion of the retreating grille before he was thrown into the sidewall again.

He drew breath to scream something. He was unsure what, perhaps that his seat belt was not helping, but then the car was sliding again. He smelled that reeking, yellow-green burn, and then they were running down a cross street in a new direction. The alarm had gone out over the Cloud, by now, and the self-drives ahead yanked away to the curbs to be out of their way, wide-eyed sleeping passenger stares following them through the windows as they passed and everywhere the orange strobe of caution lights. Looking at these strangers, Gilles felt a giddy laugh buried somewhere deep down, locked within under the pressure of his constricted throat.

"Something's wrong!" he shouted. "Where are the police?"

"I don't think they'll be much help!" Dora yelled.

"No, I mean where are they? We've wrecked a motel building and torn up this whole street!"

"I don't really care right now, Gilles, as long as they stay the hell out of the way!"

"HE IS COMING AGAIN," Sigma said. Being wedged into the seat, Gilles realized suddenly that the green wireframe of the projected world was still there as it had always been, had never ceased to be. This hidden world had gone unnoticed in the last little interval. He ducked and turned into the seat, looking through the cushions and beyond, and in their black depths, he could see the sedan's wireframe plunging toward them. Hovering over it, the nameplate "Belen" along with a distance indicator counting down rapidly to zero.

Dora swerved the car again to anticipate their assailant, but this time he swerved to counter, waiting for her to dip left so he could fly right. Gilles looked on in shock as the part of the sedan visible through their passenger window pulled up alongside, flinched as door panels collided. Dora tensed and glanced in the man's direction, snarling through her teeth. They could both see the driver now, both Dora and Gilles. There was no hat; just the round, androgynous face under a cap of brown, ringlet curls that lifted in little, dancing jerks as he rolled the window down. He pulled out a pistol, pointed it at Dora, and hesitated. She fought the shifter and the pedals to speed up and slow down by turns, trying to get that cavernous barrel off her, but he matched them for speed and position, never taking his eyes from her, left hand mirroring the whipping, slapping actions of her own upon the wheel.

The sedan darted lightly, following them, matching them, and the barrel twitched in small increments as it tracked her.

She divided her attention between the road ahead and the gun, side-swiping many cars that had already pulled out of the way, and in frustration, yelled through the window, "Fuck you!"

"Sigma!" Gilles screamed.

The Hoplite thrust up from the seat in a side push-up, blocking the window with its bulk. A moment later Gilles heard pop-gun reports, just as before, and he knew that Sigma was being peppered. Through the patter of bullet impacts, Sigma said, "I SUGGEST YOU TAKE A NEW STRATEGY. THE CURRENT COURSE OF ACTION DOES NOT SEEM TO BE WORKING."

"What would I do without you?" Dora yelled. The car dipped beneath them, and Gilles watched in horror as she yanked the emergency brake with her right hand. The whole vehicle turned sideways again, groaning through the center of an intersection, and they were plunging down a new street. In the overlay, Gilles saw the sedan grind to a halt in the direction they had been traveling, and it rapidly decreased in size to a green blotch as they sped away. He heard the ratchet of the emergency brake again, again felt the slide of the world beneath him, and made a kind of eye contact with Sigma's turret. The Hoplite no longer shielded the window with its body. It now wedged itself into the door, bracing against the side of Dora's seat and the dashboard with his arms to keep from being thrown across the car to crush them both.

"Have you been damaged?" Gilles shouted.

The turret whipped around and said, "I HAVE NOT. SYSTEMS NOMINAL."

"Oh, I'm fine, thanks!" Dora growled. She threw the car out to the side, and the world darkened as they speared down an alley, brick

walls close-in on either side, sounds now closer as the tighter world shoved the echoes of their own passage back against them, then the world opening up again into a new street, the car sliding sideways over the world, the acrid burn of the yellow-green smoke, and the forever-strobing flash of orange caution lights.

“Did we lose him?” Dora asked.

Gilles blinked several times, struggling to teach himself how to prefer the overlay to reality, gave up and closed his eyes. He was thrown into the dark panic of weaving green lines, of overlays upon overlays, occlusions, and jumbled information.

“Sigma, in the overlay! Cut out everything but the buildings and that car!”

The noise dissolved. Now he saw vast rows of vertical and horizontal lines sliding past each other in different directions like fences posts. They seemed to sheer and pixelate as they crossed each other, and somewhere beyond these, he thought he saw a darting box.

“Kill the buildings!”

The last snarl of green noise disappeared, and in the new darkness, he saw the box with the nameplate. It seemed very far away, but he could see it darting quickly, sometimes moving laterally, and sometimes seeming not to move at all; only growing larger as he focused. The distance indicator beneath the nameplate counted down as he watched—sometimes fast and sometimes slow—but always down.

“Do you see him?” Dora called.

The distance indicator transitioned beneath one mile and began ticking off feet. The numbers now spun rapidly, like the altimeter of a dying aircraft plunging to earth.

“He’s coming!” Gilles gasped.

“Is he onto our street yet?”

“No! He’s one block over!”

“How far back?”

“Uh... passing twenty-nine hundred feet...now! Wait! He’s turned. No, he’s coming over now! He’s coming over to our street right now!”

“Good!”

“Good?”

She grunted the word “motherfucker” through a twisted, tooth-clamped sneer before her hand dipped again to the e-brake. Gilles had enough time to hiss “Shit!” and brace against the seat before the world spun again, this time in a sickening lurch eclipsing all that had come before. He found himself sprawled against the hard angles and sharp lines of Sigma’s bulk, hips wailing under the pinch of the seat belt, cradled by knobby, metal hands pressing counter to the swing of his body. The Hemi slammed into position and stopped, sitting quietly for

a split second, before she shoved the shifter knob up toward the dashboard so hard Gilles thought she might snap the eight-ball off, and then the Hemi was screaming again, grinding and screaming like it would suck the whole city up through its intake and spit it out again in a dark fury. She dumped the clutch, they began to fish-tail to the left, and then the tires hooked, and Gilles was slammed into the back seat as if Sigma had thrown him.

“CAUTION! EXTREME CAUTION!” Sigma alarmed. He sat up, the tortured passenger seat groaning beneath him, pointed through the windshield, and *blatted* deep within his chest.

Gilles followed Sigma’s pointing finger and saw, in the distance and bearing down on them like a battering ram, the glare of the black sedan’s oncoming grille.

“SonofaGOD!” he wailed.

He reached out to grab Dora’s shoulder. He could only see the side of her cheek from that angle and was certain he saw the dimple of a smile before she yanked it down into second and pinned him to the cushion. A few seconds later she did it again in third. The sedan bore down on them, glinting like Hell in the sunlight, growing rapidly in his view, and the glare from the grille tried to blind him, and Dora threw it up another gear, though he would be damned if he knew which one, and that sedan kept growing larger and larger.

He jammed his eyes shut and screamed through a locked throat, the sound ripping through his teeth like the squealing of their tires, and he realized in great dismay that he could still see the car coming. It was all green lines and impersonal data and had now grown so big that it took up his entire mind. It threatened to swallow him, then swiped by to the left, and there was another bowel-shaking explosion.

His eyes snapped open. When he realized they were still alive, that they were still plunging ahead, he shouted, “What...?” then jerked up, and looked out the rear window. Diminishing in the distance was the wreckage of the sedan, turned on its side and wrapped around one of the self-drive vehicles that had pulled to the side of the road.

Of all the cars on that street, the sedan and the small, bubbled self-drive car the sedan had murdered were the only two machines that lacked strobing, orange caution lights.

The Hemi lurched again, and the wreckage disappeared around the turn of an intersection. Gilles faced forward and asked, “Was... was anyone killed in that?”

“UNKNOWN. IT IS OUT OF MY SENSOR RANGE.”

“Can you see any Lens traffic?”

“UNKNOWN. I AM SORRY, GILLES.”

“You were right,” Dora said, pulling the car back down to a reasonable speed. “There should be a swarm of cops on us right now.

What the hell's going on?"

Gilles could only shake his head. His jaw felt like it wanted to fall off his skull.

"What about Guardian?" she asked. "They should have seen..."

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know but...you'd better get us off the road. There are a lot of people looking right now."

"Yeah... yeah, I think you're right."

"We should ditch this car..."

"Yes," Dora agreed. "Hey, Sigma? There a garage or something close by?"

"A MECHANIC?"

"No—a mechanic, Jesus—a big parking garage. Something covered."

"I AM RELAYING DATA TO GILLES NOW."

"There'll be cameras," Gilles warned. "For public safety..."

"Any more than're supposed to be out here?" Dora asked.

"Well... no."

"Then we'll have to deal. We need to get out of the open; the side panels on this car look just like something that's been used to rip up the city traffic. They're gonna be looking for cars like ours, you know?"

"I wonder why..." Gilles muttered.

"Hey, you know what—?"

"No, that's not meant to be an insult. Dora... that was incredible. Who the hell taught you to drive like that?"

"Nobody taught me," she sniffed.

"What, you... you just picked it up?"

"Were you gonna tell me how to get to the goddamned garage, or not?"

"Shit, sorry! Take a right up here."

She did, and the further they traveled the quieter the world became. The caution lights had been left behind, and Dora now kept them legally in the manual lane, obeying the rules of the road against the danger of drawing further attention, though he could see her knuckles were bone white around the wheel.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Not right now, Gilles. Let me get us out of sight. Let's get out of sight, get the hell out of this town, and then we can start talking about our feelings, *sabes*?"

"Sure. Sure, you got it. Left at the second light."

Gilles went silent, and in a little while he leaned forward, placed his forehead against the back of Dora's seat, and moaned softly.

"Hey," she said. "Hey, what is that?"

"Ugh..." He burped softly and resisted the urge to spit.



"Hello? Talk to me."

"Just a little nauseous. Just... *ugh*... gimme a minute..."

"Hey, don't you get sick back there. You hear me? I'm serious, man, I'm not in the mood."

"It's nothing I plan to do on purpose, I assure you..."

"Don't you fucking do it, Gilles. I'm not in the mood to smell it. Enough has happened today, and it's not even noon."

"Shut up a bit, can't you? And... uh, the garage is coming up on your right..."

He felt the car sway and groaned.

"Gilles...!"

"Knock it off, I said."

"PLEASE DESIST FROM FIGHTING. IT PROFITS THE SITUATION NOTHING."

Within Gilles's mind, he heard Sigma whisper, "Her heart rate is greatly elevated, Gilles. She's just as impacted by this as you. I believe you're scaring her more."

Gilles sighed, swallowed hard, and sat up. He reached forward and squeezed Dora's shoulder. It felt like a knot of wood. He said, "Hey, I'm alright. I'm sorry. It's okay. Are you alright?"

"Of course I'm alright!"

"Okay, okay!" He removed his hand. "No problem. Everything's fine."

"Am I alright..." she muttered in disgust.

"Okay," he repeated. They plunged into the darkness of the parking garage.

"We'll need to settle for something more common," she sighed, making a trial circuit around the lower level. "It'll be self-drive again, I think. We won't find any *Abuelos* in here."

"Yes."

"Sigma, I guess you'll be driving again."

"UNDERSTOOD. PLEASE ATTEMPT TO LOCATE A VEHICLE WITH SUFFICIENT SPACE."

Dora snorted. "Legroom? The toaster's worried about le—"

"AS I HAVE OFTEN REPEATED, I SERVE MANY MORE FUNCTIONS—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, alright. I'll look for a family van or something."

"There's an empty spot over there in the corner," Gilles suggested. "It looks nice and dark."

"Yeah, I see it. Hang on..."

Both sides of the Hemi had been caved in and scraped clean of paint. They left the Hoplite reclined in the passenger seat while they stood looking at it, Dora shaking her head in a slow, sad manner.

"What a shame," she said. "It was really a beautiful car."

"I feel bad for the poor bastard who owned it."

She shrugged. "Ones like him always have insurance."

"Yes, but... I'm sure this was his baby."

She looked at him, eyes tired. "We don't have the time for what this discussion wants to become. Let's just go find something with a full charge and try to get the toaster moved to it without anyone seeing, huh?"

As if to prove her point, a two-seater rolled silently by and they suspected it from the corners of their eyes, unwilling to move until it was gone. After it disappeared to the upper level, he said, "We need to figure out where we're going."

They found a mini-van with a retracting rear seat and enough of a charge to get them halfway into any adjacent state. There was an old-fashioned Homburg in the back, suggesting whoever had owned the vehicle also had a child in the preteen to teenage range. The only people who went around in those things were kids; those living the Mummer sub-culture. When they found it, Dora looked it over and dusted the brim with her forearm, then passed it to Gilles.

“Put that on.”

He turned it over in his hands and shook his head. “I’m not young enough to pull it off.”

“Sure you are. You have the body of a young boy. Put it on, and no one will look at your face.”

“I’d rather not...”

“Gilles... I’m not your chauffeur. You’re riding up front with me, and if you’re going to do that, we need something to make you look a little less you. Something you can pull down if someone passes by looking in the window.”

He put it on.

“A HANDSOME ADDITION, GILLES.”

“It’s tight.”

“Wear it in the city,” Dora said. “When we find open road you’ll throw it on the dash.”

They left the garage in a slow roll, stiff-muscled, hands clenched, teeth clamped. Every passing car an alarm, every pedestrian on the brink of pointing, of calling out. It never happened. The world around them was quiet, and people went on with their day in the usual distraction.

“Gilles, can you still see Sigma’s world?” Dora asked.

He startled softly. It was becoming a surprise to be reminded of it, and it alarmed him how quickly the experience was becoming common. He had stopped feeling their thickness beneath his eyelids long ago.

“Yes.”

“Can you see through to the crash?”

He looked around a while until he found it; a general thickening of green in the distance, somewhere through layers of buildings. He tried to find something that looked like a wrecked car or a tow truck,

perhaps an ambulance, but the lines all globbed together, and he could not focus enough on a single thing so that a detail tag would pop.

"Sigma, can you tone it down a bit? If you can, just give me the street where the wreck happened?"

"TRY THIS."

"Yes, that's good, thank you. Okay, I see two fire trucks, a few ambulances... a whole mess of police up at the intersection—yeah, there they are. A whole mess of police."

"What are they doing?"

"Uh... just the police, please, Sigma? Umm... looks like they're milling around."

"Doing what?"

"I can't tell. I don't actually see people, Dora, they're just basic outlines. If I look directly at one long enough, a little box pops up with a name, address, and so on. Maybe they're collecting witness reports?"

"What the hell would they do that for?" Dora asked. "Why wouldn't they just pull your little Guardian feed?"

Gilles could only shrug. He did not know what standard police procedure looked like in any case. He continued to watch the activity as it grew farther away, as their own new vehicle glided up the street, taking them toward the freeway, he presumed. He focused on one of the outlines until a contact card popped, then practiced holding the information in place after he lost its owner. It was getting easier to do the more he played around with it. He was forced to admit the controls were impressive. Intuitive.

"Sigma?"

"YES, GILLES?"

"There's a ton of information shown when I hover on different people; I'm assuming that's all Lens data?"

"CORRECT. ALL OF IT IS LENS DATA PULLED FROM THE CLOUD."

"Why did our attacker have none? I'm looking at many people right now. I'm seeing full names, surnames, in some cases maiden names and aliases. I see addresses, phone numbers, contact lists. Just a second ago I realized there was a tab on the overlay, and when I pulled it forward, I was shown a list of someone's last twenty purchases."

"MUCH OF THAT DATA IS PRIVILEGED."

"Yes, I understand that, but our attacker had none of it. There was only a small rectangle with that name, 'Belen.' No last name. I've never even heard a name like that before."

"It is of Spanish origin," Dora said absently.

They heard Sigma *blat* from the rear of the van. "ALSO GREEK."

“Fine, fine, it doesn't matter,” Gilles said, waving a hand. “So many words, so many names are traded around in that part of the world, so much so that names mean nothing anymore. They mean nothing, and then even when they mean something, it usually ends up making them mean even less. Earlier when I called Reggie, he thought I was someone named Corban. So these lenses came off a Corban, I guess. Now the guy chasing us has gone from a Corban to a Belen.”

“You were sure he was dead,” Dora said.

“Yet you saw him as clearly as I did in that sedan. He's got some sort of replacement Lenses. I didn't think you could get them that easily. Once, many years ago, there were things called burner phones —”

“Yes, they still have them down South,” Dora nodded. “*Celulares de prepagos.*”

“I wonder if someone's found a way to make, uh, burner Lenses? I can't imagine how, but... you know?”

“Why wouldn't they be able to?” Dora asked.

Gilles blew a gust of air through his mouth as he thought about it. “Well, maybe you could do it if you took them off the Cloud. But it would be pointless. Once you re-connected, that would be it.”

“Why?”

“Because you'd be detected and they'd shut you down.”

Dora rolled her eyes and shook her head. “There are ways to get around such things.”

“Oh, what are they?”

“I don't know what they are. I know only they are there. There is always a way.”

“No,” Gilles said in a tired voice. “It's all run by the SC's in the end. There's no getting around them.”

She snorted. “How is it I know more than you? I thought you did these things for a living?”

“No one gets around the SCs,” he repeated.

Dora shook her head. “No wonder so many of you are crazy. You assume you've been beaten before fighting.”

He had become used to her attitude, and it no longer bothered him. It was a natural way to be, to assume all things familiar were better. She spoke of the craziness in his country, believed in their craziness as the product of a simple equation, but he also knew she came from a place where conversations opened with threats, where you threatened violence as payment for sexual assault. She came from a world where the police could be purchased and repurchased openly, as if an auction were held in the middle of the street, and they would say whatever words had been placed in their mouths by the highest bidder, would keep on saying those words until someone with more

money came along and gave them new words.

"I don't think it's a matter of losing a fight," he said, watching pedestrians scroll by on the sidewalk. He idly pulled interesting details as they flitted through his vision. He sensed a perversion taking hold in his mind, grabbing onto soft places as he discovered the hidden behaviors of these strangers. He discovered with a bit of effort that he could see their sexual habits if he looked in the right direction. "I think... I think it's more like building a thing that got away from us, as we always do. You can't un-discover a secret. Trying to cover up a thing you've uncovered is just vanity. It's vanity to even try. You'd cover it up, but there it would still be, waiting, and you'd know it's there, and after a while, you'd bring it out again. It becomes easier to just accept the new thing and learn to live around it."

He looked at her and saw her face was twisted in some form of confusion... or disgust. "It wasn't a thing you discovered, Gilles. You built the damned thing. All of you. You couldn't see it as you were building it?"

"It is sometimes very hard to see it all at once."

"Bullshit. You pull your mind back, pull it high up so you can see everything, and then you look at it. You see how it's playing out, and if it doesn't look any good, you stop it. As any sane person would do."

"The thing you're describing is not as easy as you suggest," Gilles said.

"If you say so."

He saw the freeway on-ramp in the distance, moving toward them like a great concrete decision, and he knew the decision must now be made.

"Which way do we go?" he asked.

"Out of town, first of all. You said that place you need to get to is out in New York?"

"Yes."

"Well, then I guess we'll head East."

"DUE EAST, UNDERSTOOD."

Gilles winced. "That's a hell of a drive. You think we can make it all the way in a stolen car?"

"Hell no. But we can't make it out of here on foot and you sure as shit can't fly anywhere. You go anywhere within a thousand yards of an airport, and I bet they come piling down on you like an avalanche. I bet you look at an airport funny, even, and they snatch you up."

He looked down at his feet and took a deep breath. That sick feeling was back again.

"You're in pretty deep shit, Gilles."

"Don't I know it?"

"I'm okay. I can pretty much go *poof* any time I need to; they don't

know who I am. But you're in it pretty deep."

"Why don't you? It's not that I don't appreciate how you've saved me—trust me, I'm aware you've saved me today. But why? You could skip across the border and head back any time. It can't be the life of opportunity up here that's keeping you..."

"No," she said. Her voice was small and far away.

"Well?"

"I don't know. I don't know. It's like... I don't know why it had to be your house and not the one next to it. I don't know why I stayed there after I knew you didn't have anything worth pinching. It's like that for me, sometimes. Sometimes I do a thing, and I don't even know why."

"Huh. Must be intuition."

"Shut up," she said and slapped him on the arm. It was a playful slap that made him smile.

"So, east, then," Gilles sighed. He settled back into the seat. "How far can we get in this heap?"

"THE CHARGE IN THIS VEHICLE IS SUFFICIENT TO TAKE US HALFWAY INTO THE NEXT STATE."

"And then I guess we steal another?"

"No," Dora said. "Too much risk. I don't know what the hell happened today, but we can't keep relying on your people to be asleep at the switch. We'll take a train."

"A train? That's as bad as a plane or a bus. We can't use my VID for passage, you don't even have one, and I have to imagine Sigma's been reported as stolen property by now."

"I HAVE NOT."

Gilles glanced into the back of the van. "You haven't?"

"NO."

He faced front. "Oh. But that's nuts. The cost to run you alone—"

"THE PINKERTON AGENCY ARE FAMILIAR WITH THIS SORT OF THING, GILLES."

Inside his mind, he heard the words, "It's fine, it's all fine," and they were warm and good. He decided to let it go and trust.

"We'll take a freight train," Dora said.

"A freight train?" he laughed. The laughter tore through into a coughing fit, and he was several moments recovering. "Now who's crazy?"

"Yes, of course," she smirked, "for you, all systems are impenetrable. I understand, and I don't hold it against you." She reached across the center console and patted his hand like he was a sweet, old man. He thought he should have been offended at the gesture, but it felt so true that he forgot how to take offense. He forgot how to do many things under that touch, and when she squeezed his

hand, he looked at her golden eyes, her tight-lidded, almond eyes, and at her smile, and at the smoothness of her brown skin. He wondered if she ever had the chance to love someone instead of always having to defend herself from people, if there had ever been a time when defense was unnecessary. She could have been fourteen or twenty-four, easily, one way or the other, and he thought he would love to see her have the chance to look at a young man the way Annalise had once looked at him. The way she smiled at him and the way she had squeezed his hand, briefly before returning to her armrest, and the honesty that hid just behind the point of her chin and under the small wrinkle between her eyebrows told him she had it coming. He figured she must have had that chance coming her whole life, and figured also that the universe sometimes had a way of overlooking debts. Sometimes the universe accumulated debts to people, he thought, whether it was rational or not. Sometimes enough things happened to a person that a debt stacked up in their favor, but the universe was cold and unscrupulous.

Sometimes, the universe needed help remembering. She was not looking at him anymore, but he continued to look at her, at the gold in her hair and her eyes and at the newness of her skin and at the honesty that hid behind the small, dark corners.

He thought he would help the universe to remember her chance.



They stopped for food at the last point before the state border a little after midday. It was a charging station in the middle of the desert, and because it was so far outside of any city, it was still a reliable place to find gasoline. You could never find gasoline in the cities anymore, not unless you went to specialty places and paid three times over market plus all the taxes and carbon fees. There were still the taxes and carbon fees out in the desert, but you did not have to pay three times over market, so it was still a deal for which many would travel. Gasoline vehicles were owned either by the very rich or the very poor, generally speaking, and both class came out to Nara Visa often enough that the little town survived.

Standing in the town's center on the highway that sliced through like a scalpel, you could turn a circle and see every building the place had to offer, with enough of the surrounding world jammed into the gaps and other open spaces that you saw more of the desert than the town, and the sky spun out overhead like a clouded dome, stretching horizon to horizon, stretching out so far you started to wonder how there could be any more world than the world you saw right then.

They parked the van around the back of the station, hoping to keep it and Sigma both out of sight. There were no cameras in such a small town—their primary reason for stopping there—and Dora had swapped out the plate before boosting the van anyway, but they did not want anyone to see Sigma. A Hoplite was still rare enough that people would stop and stare, maybe snap a picture or three, posting them to the Cloud as evidence they had seen an uncommon thing.

Everything required evidence, anymore. Gilles had once thought, naively so, that the wide adoption of Lenses would put an end to the selfie. It seemed that with age came more opportunity to be wrong; they devised a wristwatch to pair with the Lenses, and you could put a camera in anything. Gilles recalled reading somewhere they were looking at putting cameras inside of cameras, now, and was convinced when he saw it that he had encountered a joke. He was convinced for a while until he gave it more thought. You never wanted to be too certain in the world; it had a cruel sense of humor and loved to laugh at certain people.

The van did not yet require a charge, and they could not have plugged it in anyway. The garage they had boosted it from was not

much for overnight business, being occupied mostly by day workers or business people, and it was a good bet the van had been reported. Plugging in for a charge meant announcing their position, and there was no way for Sigma to get around it. Your VID had to match the VIN of the vehicle or your VID needed to be on a list of authorized operators; the juice simply did not flow, otherwise. This was alright, though. They had known this to be the case.

It was Dora that needed the charge, not the van. They had listened to her stomach growling for the last fifty miles.

A bell rang when they passed through the door; an honest to God bell with a baby-fine clapper that chimed through the store, causing Gilles to pull his hat down over his eyes. Dora snorted at this and whispered at him to knock it off. Nobody cared out here. They had traveled beyond the borders, beyond the places where people were dutiful, and it was safe to relax a little. He tipped his hat back and attempted a grin. She tried to resist smiling but could not and led him to the back of the store. The man working behind the counter, an old, slow-moving fellow with wisps of hair penciled over the top of his head and a name tag that said "Orlin" watched them float through the shelves in a slow-eyed disinterest. When they passed from view, his eyes dipped back to the tablet on the counter and resumed whatever happened to be on the screen.

"What sounds good to you?" Dora asked, looking at row on row of packages. Cellophane, foil, plastic, paper, Mylar; brightly colored packaging; little packages designed to stand out, to arrest attention. They all crammed in on each other noisily and were indistinct.

"This isn't food," he muttered.

"No," she agreed. She grabbed a few items and wedged them under her arm. "It is edible, though."

"It's all corn syrup, corn product, processed wheat, preservatives..."

"Gilles, if there was something better, I'd take it. This stuff, at least, has a date stamped on it. The hot dogs up front look like they were installed when the place was built."

She selected a large pack of pork rinds and tucked it up with the other items.

"Grab some waters from the cooler, would you?" she asked.

"Dora... how will we pay for all this?"

"Pay?"

"Yes, pay. I don't have any cash, assuming they take it here. I can't use my VID for obvious reasons."

She looked at him a few moments, then glanced down the aisle. "There's a back door beyond the bathroom."

"Theft?" he hissed.

“Quiet. And yeah, what about it?”

“We can't steal this stuff, Dora.”

Her lips tightened into a line, and he could not tell if she held back frustration or a laugh. “It's a few packets of food, Gilles.”

“I don't care, it's no good.” He thought for a minute, searching for a point that would carry weight. “Look, if we run, he'll report the theft. Don't you think that'll bring some attention out this way that we don't need?”

Now she did laugh. “For a bag of Doritos, Gilles? What planet are you from?”

“What's the name of the planet where people don't make casual theft a part of their daily routine? I'm from that one.”

“Oh, grow up,” she rolled her eyes. “Look, this is not the heist you seem to think it is. We'll each grab a few handfuls and then just walk out the back. It's fine; the van is around back, anyway. Send a message to Sigma to turn the motor on. The trick is that when we walk out, we have to do it with complete certainty. Complete belief, as if we know we're doing exactly as we should. Father Time, up there, will take a while to figure out what it all means, and by the time he shuffles outside on his walker to shout after us we'll be halfway to the border.”

It was becoming a challenge to remain calm. He put his back to the man at the counter in hopes of shielding his voice and hissed, “We are not doing it. I'm not allowing it.”

“You're not allowing it?” she giggled. “This, Gilles? This is where you draw the line? Some chips, a few candy bars, and bottled water? You were fine with the food I pinched for you before; maybe it was because you couldn't see me take it. You're fine with stealing cars, fraud, and murder but grand theft *chicharrónes* is the deal-breaker, huh?”

“He wasn't dead. And since when have I committed fraud?”

“You're peeping through pinched Lenses, buddy. That's ID theft.”

He stared at her a moment, blinking numbly, then grunted, “Shit! Shit, I hadn't thought of that. Goddamn it!”

“Stop fanning your hands like that; you look like an old woman.”

“Shut up! Jesus Christ, how the hell does this keep getting more fucked up? I was supposed to be on a plane last night! Goddamn it! *Goddamn it!* Murder and identity theft—”

“You said he wasn't dead...”

“Which time? The first time Sigma killed him or when you plowed him into a line of parked cars?”

“Plowed him?” she squeaked. He was beginning to violate her sense of fairness.

“Plowed him, chickened him, whatever! Son of a—yes, why not? Let's steal the chimichangas—”

"Chicharrónes..."

"—and burn the whole fucking place down when we're done, right? We can add arson to the list; why not?"

He heard a low buzz in his head, fading in and out between gasps of breath. Dora stared at him uneasily, and he ignored her a moment to concentrate on the buzz. He realized it was Sigma, whispering into his mind.

"Sigma, speak up," Gilles muttered.

"Sorry, Gilles. I didn't wish to alarm you. You seemed to be doing that well enough yourself."

"Hah-fucking-hah," Gilles said. "What is it?"

"I was going to mention you should try to calm down as you seem to have drawn the attention of—"

"Y'all okay, back here?"

The voice came on a slow roll, like the settling of an old house in warm weather. Gilles flinched as if struck and yelped, "*Jesus!*" He spun around, and standing there at his heels was Orlin.

"Easy, feller. Y'all's gonna fit if you keep on like that."

"Sorry! I'm sorry," Gilles gasped. He took several breaths to bring his heart under control. Dora had frozen in place like a frightened rabbit.

"Y'all're fixin' to rob me," he said, disappointed. He sounded like a father grown tired of pointing out his son's failings.

"What! Ahaha-hah-ah, what are you even talking about?" Gilles rattled. "Don't be crazy! Hah-ha-ahahaha..."

Orlin rolled his eyes and then pointed to a tiny, black node behind his ear. "C'mon, young feller, knock it off."

"Oh... shit..."

"Watch yer mouth. Plus, you can't slip out the back. Door's locked. C'mon up front, then, I'll ring you out..."

He turned and began the long shuffle back to the counter. Gilles stared after him, mouth open and dried out like stale cotton.

"That's it," Dora whispered. "We gotta jam right now."

"Shut up!" Gilles shot back. "The whole place is miked; he can hear!"

"Christ, but you two sure are bad at this," Orlin called from the front. "Reckon y'all want to find another line."

Dora grimaced at Gilles and mouthed the word, "Fu-uuuck..."

"C'mon, then."

"Hey, Sigma?" Gilles whispered. "Thanks for the warning. Ass."

"I'm sorry, Gilles. Whatever surveillance is in effect isn't a Cloud system. I can't see it."

Gilles nodded at Dora, and they approached the counter like doomed children. Dora stared at Orlin a few moments, sighed, and

dumped her items on the counter. Orlin yawned and began to run them over a scanner.

“Look, mister, we're really very sorry about this. But you must know, if you heard us, that we have no money to pay you,” Gilles said.

“Yep...” He continued running items over the scanner.

Gilles watched him do this a few seconds, uncertain, and then continued. “So I was hoping we could just put these items back on the shelf for you and be on our way? We'll... we'll just leave, and, uh... no need to call the police, erm. You know?”

“Ain't callin' no poe-lice.”

“Oh?”

“Hate the gawt-damned poe-lice.”

“Oh, thank Christ.”

“Paper-pushing, enforcing, sonsabitches...”

“Yes, quite. Understood.”

“Come out with them suits. ‘Y'all got to upgrade yer 'lectrical an' yer plumbin'. Ain't up to code; gotta bring 'er in line with the code.' Bastards...”

“Indeed,” Gilles said. He braced his hands on the edge of the counter to keep from collapsing.

“Hate them gawt-damned poe-lice...”

From within his mind, Gilles heard Sigma say, “Warning: you have company. A state trooper has pulled up outside. It looks like he's heading your way.”

He looked at Dora, eyes fit to pop from their sockets, and said, “Remain calm.”

“Course I'm calm,” Orlin said, scanning the last packet. “Calm as you please. Easy to be calm, 'round here. Nothing ever happens, 'round here.”

The trooper came through the door, ringing the little bell, and Gilles saw the panic flush through Dora's face before she pulled the mask back over it. The trooper was a large man, well-built with muscle. He had a close shave that shined pinkly with sweat and a pair of aviator sunglasses with mirrored lenses, and Gilles thought disjunctedly how some things never seemed to go out of fashion.

“Afternoon, Orlin,” the trooper called as he wandered toward the coffee bar.

“Alright, then, Paris. How's she going?”

“Bout as well as she can.”

“Yep,” Orlin agreed. He watched after the trooper a bit, then looked back at Gilles and Dora and smacked his lips.

Dora glanced around nervously before leaning closer to the counter. Sensing her mood, Orlin leaned in to meet her.

"I thought you said you hated the police?" she whispered.

"Hell, that ain't the poe-lice. That's just Paris."

She settled back on her heels and looked up at the ceiling.

"Anyways. Y'all want a bag for this?"

Gilles glanced down at the pile on the counter. Looking back at Orlin, he said, "But... we haven't paid."

"Thought y'all said y'ain't had no money."

"No..."

"Well, then how the hell y'all supposed to pay?"

Gilles was working hard not to convulse. He felt as if a noose was tightening slowly around his ankle, or neck, and fought against his instinct to stand there gibbering like a moron.

"I... we... we can't."

"Alright, then."

"Hey, you folks okay?" Paris asked. His voice seemed to originate from the base of Gilles's own neck, and he hunched in reflex. Paris saw this and said, "Damn, chief. Really, you okay? You folks need some help or anything?"

"No... we're... no, sir," Gilles said.

"They're okay, Paris," Orlin said. He waved through the air before his face as though batting away a fly. "Just lost."

"Oh, well, where you folks trying to get?"

"Never mind. I told 'em where to get."

Gilles closed his eyes and breathed heavily. He nodded and said, "Yes. Thank you."

"Alright, then."

His eyes were closed, but the green world was still there, hazy, now, and undefined, with suggested edges and blurred lines. He wondered if it had to do with a lack of infrastructure through the area. Perhaps this was what Sigma's sonar looked like.

He felt a kick at his ankle and opened his eyes. Dora stood there holding the food, nudging into him with her shoulder. She bugged her eyes toward the door and said, "Well, let's go. Uh, Dad..."

"Yes..." Gilles said. Then, "Yes, of course. Thanks, uh, Mister Orlin."

"Alright, then."

She kicked him in the ankle again, much harder than before, and he absently noted the ring of the bell as they passed through the door.

"What the fuck just happened?" he asked.

"Not the time to ask. Let's just get in the damned van and—"

The door swung open behind them, and they stood there, locked up, when Paris called, "Hey, stop! Just hang on a minute!"

"Am I needed?" Sigma asked.

"No," Gilles whispered. "Stay put." He turned slowly and found the

trooper nearly on top of him, looking down on them like a judge from his bench. "Yes, sir?"

"Y'all left this." He held out a bag of jerky.

Gilles stared down at it like an idiot until Dora said, "Take it, Dad. My hands are a little full, here."

He pinched the bag between dead fingers and looked back up at the trooper. He said, "Thank you, sir," before he made eye contact with the man; he noted remotely that the aviators were gone.

They locked eyes, and there was something like a static flash that lit the whole world in green fuzz. The sparse, run-down buildings around him washed out in green and the cracked, dusty lot went green. The trooper was a wall of green under a faded green sky. It faded out as quickly as it had come on, the light of the late afternoon now dull in contrast, and he felt that all around him were shades of grays and browns.

"You're welcome, Mister... uh... Mister Guattari. Damn, hell of a handle, that. Anyways, you're welcome, sir. Ya'll have a good day, now."

"Yes. Yes, you as well."

They turned to leave, heard a departing "Alright, then," as they went around the side of the building. When the van was in sight, Gilles whimpered, "What the hell...?"

"Just get in the fucking van," Dora whispered. "I don't want to say or do another thing until we're about a hundred miles away from here."

Gilles nodded and then giggled gently. His mouth was still hanging open.

They drove away in silence. They continued on in this fashion, traveling east for a half hour with the food forgotten on the ground. Dora's appetite had been murdered, it seemed, but after a while, it came back when the nerves departed, and then she was ripping into the sterile packaging like a small, brown piranha.

Gilles watched her for a few moments, quietly, and finally grinned. She looked at him and said, "What?"

"Dad?"

"Oh, shut up. You didn't do any better."

"Hey, you watch your mouth, young lady."

She threw a packet of chips at him. He caught it, laughing.

The nearest yard running Intermodal trains was in Amarillo, which was good news. The van had enough charge to get there; enough left over to ditch it outside the North Yard by an old scrap processing plant. From there, they cut around the edge of the scrap yard's property and picked up the tracks on the north side. Their hiding spot was outside the rail yard, out of range of the probes and sensors, and all they had to worry about was the occasional Bull.

The silence of the area was the best thing. There were some decrepit livestock yards close by that looked like they had seen neither worker nor steer in twenty years. It was all quiet, stale air, and the only movement was of the crows digging through trash. It was an easy job to get Sigma out of the van, past the property, and tucked in under the trees off the main line without being seen. They all wedged in behind a garbage pile and waited for evening to come on, holding their breath when the occasional security truck lumbered by.

They saw many trains pass along the track as they waited for the sun's retreat. Dora called them "IMs." "There goes another IM," she would whisper, nodding needlessly as it rattled past, wheels sometimes squealing. Then she would shake her head and say, "It's probably a good one. But we can't go in the daylight. That's just asking for it."

They sat quietly, breathing the rust smell of the scrap yard; the rubber smells, and the wood and dust smells. They spoke very little. Dora spent much time looking for movement while Gilles was too nervous to do anything other than fidget. Sigma did not understand the discomfort that comes with prolonged silence, and so conserved his energy. The inner workings of his core suggested energy conservation was a wise policy. The next opportunity to recharge might not come, and he did not wish to drain himself prematurely. He wondered if it would be necessary to shut down certain sensory functions to preserve his battery and hoped he would not need to do so. He did not wish to be sub-optimal.

When dusk fell, Dora whispered, "Sigma, how much Cloud access do you have?"

"COMPARABLE TO THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE, THOUGH I CAN EXERT CERTAIN EXIGENCIES."

"Good. Next train that passes, I want you to get the number off the



lead engine and check it against BNSF's shipping schedule. Amarillo, North Yard, eastbound track."

"UNDERSTOOD, MISS. AND WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR?"

"We want to know if it's heading to Chicago. Let me know if it is."

"UNDERSTOOD."

The first IM pulled through twenty minutes later, but it was not headed to Chicago. They stared at it glumly for a long time as it sat there, running out east and west for farther than they could see. Dora sighed and said, "This'll be a while. They'll probably run an inspection, and that train is at least three miles long if it's a foot. They'll be at it a while."

She looked up into the sky and seemed to taste the air.

"We're okay, though. This will be good."

"What do you mean?" Gilles asked.

"The weather is good. Not too cold. Hopefully, it'll hold like that all the way to Chicago. We're okay for now, but we'll need to get off at some point and get some decent gear."

He looked at her face in profile. It was fast becoming a soft shape in the night, losing its features as the sun died.

"Gear?"

"Jackets, packs. Something warm to sleep in. A tent, maybe, if we can find it."

"A tent? Is that a joke?"

Her shape moved, and he felt her eyes upon him.

"Gilles, this isn't like buying a ticket and going where you want. It's illegal. Please don't get the vapors or anything, but it's something we're not supposed to do. If a Bull sees us, we might get sent on our way... or they might arrest us and lock us up if they want to be assholes. Or they might take us around the back for some fun before they lock us up. So we move according to the train's schedule, not the other way around. We move only when it's safe and when it's smart. It means we could end up doing a lot of waiting, just as we're doing now, and we may end up spending a night in a field if there's a run of bad luck."

"How long do you figure it will take us to reach New York?" he asked.

Dora's shape shrugged in the darkness.

"If you do what I say, when I say, maybe tomorrow or the day after. If you don't, longer. Maybe not at all, if you don't."

He nodded and thought on this. Then he said, "How long have you been doing this, Dora?"

"Long," she said. "We should get a knife, too. A knife or something we can sharpen and put a handle on. I wish we still had your kitchen knife."

“Uh... why?”

“A knife is a thing you learn to carry. A tramp with a gun is rare on the rails. Most times if they have a gun, they haven’t any bullets for it, and if they do, they don’t want to waste the shot. A tramp who wants to interfere with you, though, is not such a rare thing. Most times they let you be, but you learn to carry a knife, too, for the times they don’t. If they see the knife, and more importantly if they see you will give them the knife many times over, they’ll leave you alone. And then sometimes it’s necessary to give them the knife anyway so that the others can see you do it.”

“Jesus...” Gilles whispered.

“I FEEL I MUST REMIND YOU OF MY PRESENCE,” Sigma said.

“I didn’t forget. Something could happen to you. Someone could wipe your clock, or we don’t find an outlet in time when you need it. Knives don’t need recharging.”

“Jesus Christ,” Gilles whispered again.

She continued as if he said nothing. “The trains are not crewed, so if there is a stop it’ll be to wait for another train to move or a reroute of some sort or an inspection. Inspections are manageable if you’re smart, but you must keep out of sight. The Bull doesn’t try very hard when he looks for you; he relies on the sensors. Also, the trains are very long, and there’s much to cover, so he’ll take a pass and just flash the cars broadside. The idiots get caught during an inspection. If there is no inspection, then the train will head on through. But when it stops, you go low and hide, whether you think it’s an inspection or not. It’s always an inspection, whether it ends up being an inspection or not, do you understand?”

“Yes, very well. What if we’re seen?”

“If we are seen we run like hell. A Bull won’t chase you very far past the yard.”

A bang came from the track, loud and sharp in the still night air, then more banging, running down the track away to the west in a fast-departing wave. The cars began to roll, ponderously slow, so slow Gilles knew he could pass them at an easy walk. They sat and watched it for nearly an hour before the tail engine passed from sight.

They remained in silence under the darkness of the night. The branches moved softly overhead and made the shadows at their feet swell and darken, and the visible parts of their skin showed gray in the light of the moon. Sometimes a bright headlight would come on in the distance, and the shadows became sharp and loud. This was the passing of a truck, and they knew to get low behind the rubble. There was an old refrigerator laid over on its side that Sigma hid behind, and they watched silently as the truck passed. After a while, Gilles’s heart stopped blasting away in his chest whenever the lights came

through, but it took practice.

“What if that truck comes by when our train arrives?” Gilles whispered.

“Then we don’t go. We’ll have to wait.”

“Hell, we could be out here all night.”

“That’s right.”

More bangs and squeals coming from somewhere far off, from another part of the yard. Gilles experimented with the Lenses as they waited and found he could pull up a clock overlay to see the time. He discovered through the experimental movements of his eyes and the flesh around them how to shift the map, to send it away and bring it back, how to change the colors of the Guard markers to bright red sores. When he had it the way he liked, he set the map back down to three dimensions and looked around. Then he increased the range and played with the display density until he could tell where and how far away they all were. None of this required Sigma’s assistance and Gilles was proud.

“What are you up to?” Dora asked.

“Looking...”

“I can see that. You keep darting your head around. You’re making me nervous. What is it?”

“I’m finding the guards. They’re far off, now. I think there are only three of them.”

“There are more.”

“I see only three.”

“Trust me, there are more.”

“Fine,” Gilles agreed.

In his mind, Sigma said, “She can’t know that for sure, Gilles. She’s going on what the world has shown her. Even so, listen to her.”

Gilles grunted and then shook his head at Dora when she looked at him again.

Another IM came through the yard an hour later, and this time when Sigma checked they discovered it was a good target. They waited a while for the engine to get well down the line. When it disappeared from sight, Gilles tensed, but Dora took his hand and held him back.

“Hang on,” she whispered. “We need the right kind of car.”

“Okay. What are we looking for?”

“A boxcar would be great, but truck trailers otherwise. They call them piggybacks; the trailers, that is. And you don’t want just any trailer. Have you seen them on the road, Gilles, with the thin skirts running the length between the wheels? Hanging down on each side?”

“Yes, those skirts are for wind resistance, I expect.”

Dora shrugged. She was not interested in the intended purpose of

the skirts. "For us, they are walls."

She did not say more, so Gilles only nodded and said, "Okay..."

The spine of the mechanized snake continued to wind out ahead of them, spreading like a dream spreads when you awake suddenly, when you come up from the darkness and the dream is still there, on top of you, but then begins to spread and thin itself away, until soon there is only the feeling of the dream, and you are either saddened or elated that it has gone. Soon, Dora's hand squeezed down on his, and then she was pulling forward, and he heard the shy clank of Sigma struggling to come out from behind the busted-out refrigerator. They ran lowly and clumsily over the gravel, the loose-packed gravel sucking at their feet, and stopped between the gap of a concrete bridge that ran over the tracks and an exhausted shack twenty feet east of it. They crouched in the shadow of the shack and Gilles saw the graffiti everywhere, covering everything in a riotous blanket of color. There was so much of it around him that all the details were hidden. It was just the colors made dull in the moonlight, the thick tracks of black paint that ran through it, and the suggestion that on such hard canvas art and obscenity lived together.

"There!" Dora hissed, gesturing at the piggyback trailers as they emerged from under the bridge.

Gilles looked through the train and beyond, at the pulsating red sore of a Bull coming their way. "We need to hurry if we want that one! Security is coming back this way!"

She was off like a fired arrow, Gilles running after her, low to the ground again, feet stuttering over gravel, lowly, nearly falling, catching himself and driving ahead with his legs and feet, Sigma crunching loudly behind. She caught the front of the closest car as it rolled by, climbed aboard, and waved frantically at Gilles to hurry up. He wrapped his hands over the cold iron of the little stepladder and saw that the red sore was getting closer. Something hard pressed into his lower back like a cold, knobby mallet, and Sigma sent, "Go on! Under the trailer!"

He watched as Dora slipped down the center of the car beneath the first trailer axle, saw how the arch of her rump clipped the bar and wondered how Sigma would get through. He wondered what they would do on the other side. It seemed as if there was no room at all in there. Then her hand was thrust out at him, waving and flapping in the moonlight like a gray fish, and somewhere deep in the shadows beneath the trailer, he heard a new voice say, "Hey, what the hell?" The voice cracked like ripping canvas.

She grabbed hold of his shoulders as he tried to wiggle under and tugged. He squirmed through to the underworld, and then he found himself crouched on his knees beneath the trailer, and there was more

room than he could have imagined. There was room enough under there to sit upright with plenty of space between his head and the trailer, and the skirts of the trailer stretched on for the whole length with the wheels blocking him in on either side. There was room enough to spread out, to lay down fully.

"Get the fuck outta here!" the ripping canvas voice called.

Gilles looked toward the tail and saw a darkened mass overlaid with the green concentric throb of a heartbeat.

"Get the fuck out yourself," Dora said. "There's room enough in here."

"Hell if there is. Don't never run more than two to a group. Not without a boxcar. You either know that, or you're ignorant. Or you're desperate. Don't need you in any case."

"Shut up!" Dora hissed. "There's a Bull!"

"Well go on and see him, then!"

Gilles saw the mass shift and began to look hard into the darkness for detail. Behind him, he heard the crunch of Sigma forcing himself through the gap between skirt and trailer wheel, and when the turret made it through, the world around Gilles washed out in hazy green like scum off a pea soup, and when the haze deadened, it was all in green. He could see that the lump was a man now, described in shades of green and black.

"Watch it, Dora, he's got a pipe."

Gilles saw his eyes go wide and pale. The man gasped, "You brought the Hoppy! Fucking bastards brought the Hoppy around!"

He disappeared under the skirt, and Gilles soon saw the throb of his green heartbeat floating back west toward the train's tail.

"Christ, he's running right at the guard," Gilles said.

"Quiet," Dora whispered.

"He'll tell them we're in here."

"No."

"No?"

"He won't rat. Keep your head down." She glanced back at Sigma, and her eyes flashed greenly like those of a cat.

"Sigma," Gilles said, "turn off the starlight. And keep down!"

The green detail under the trailer faded to black. Gilles watched through the train and beyond, where the pulsing red sore met the green echo of the vagrant.

"He's got him," Gilles said.

"Shh!"

The train rocked like the hitching hips of an old nag as it rolled slowly away. Gilles crawled up to lay beside Dora on his elbows, shivering against the cold of the metal flatbed. He watched the markers in the distance and Dora watched him closely. The little

markers floating in his vision faded away, becoming smaller.

“Well?” she asked.

“They’re not coming.”

“Uh-huh,” she said. “Told you he wouldn’t rat. Freight Hoppers don’t rat to the Bull.”

“He left everything behind,” Gilles said. There was a confused mass of items farther down the flatbed, wedged up against the trailer skirt where the vagrant’s frightened kicking had bunched it all up.

“Wait until we get a ways out from the yard. Then we’ll see what he left.”

“How far?” he asked.

“Not so far. A mile or so. Can you see the ass-end of the train in that head-map of yours?”

Gilles glanced at Sigma.

“I AM SORRY BUT NO. ONLY THE BEACON OF THE LEADING ENGINE IS ACTIVE.”

He nodded and said to Dora, “No luck, then. I can only see us. I can see the tracks for miles, though. I can see them all the way into Chicago if I look right.”

“You can see how far away from the yard we are?”

“I can see how far we are from everything, almost. Do you want to know how far we are from London?”

“I just want to know how far away we are from the yard, Gilles.”

He paused a moment. “Coming up on eighty meters from the property line.”

She nodded and rolled up onto the elevated center shelf of the rail car. She shifted to her back, tucked her arms behind her head, and said, “Say when we’re a mile out. It’ll be okay to move around a little when we get that far.”

“Not sooner? A mile is quite far.”

“You get even farther if you don’t make foolish risks,” she said.

He thought of everything else they had done together over the last couple of days and could not reconcile the brash Dora of that time with the cautious one lying beside him now. He mimicked her position, wedging his own arms beneath his head for a pillow, and focused on the easy rock of the rail car.

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It was the banging that awakened him later when the train picked up speed and began to make a real go of it. He laid there a while, trying to pass back into sleep before his skin came alive enough to feel the chill air, but it was no use now. Now they were inside the snake’s belly, and the snake bucked and surged forward like a winding bullet,

and he found his head filled with the crashing of metal and the shrieking of metal, the constant, rusted grinding of metal. His whole world was now a world of metal, a metal tomb, and it blasted within his ears like roaring hell.

He looked over at Dora and found her much the same as he had left her. He made the Lens starlight come back and saw the green of her sclera, the darkness of its iris as she watched the underside of the trailer above. She lay there in a relaxed boredom, appearing to be in the exact place that she should.

“Where are we?” he shouted.

She rolled her head over and thrust her chin at him. Her face said she had not heard him. He repeated himself quite loudly, and she shouted, “You tell me.”

He took a moment to consult the map.

“I guess we’re a few miles out. This damned train is going about ninety-five right now; I can’t believe it!”

“They get moving pretty good,” she agreed.

“Did you want to look over the hobo’s stuff?”

“Already did.”

“Oh,” he said. He waited for her to say what there was, but she said nothing. “Well?”

“Well?”

“Well, what the hell’s there?”

“Oh, sorry. Some good stuff. Some stuff not so good. Some sweaters, pants, and other clothes just as skanky as you please; I tossed those out on the rails a while ago. Washed my hands after, too. Just nasty stuff, you wouldn’t believe this guy. But he had a good pack, so we’ll keep that, and there was a sleeping bag that I’ve opened up and pinned under the toaster to air out.”

“You okay?” Gilles asked.

“Sure. Why?”

“You seem far off, right now.”

“Oh, yeah. I guess I do.” She offered nothing further.

It was very hard to speak with her in the forever-clamor of the snake’s belly, that unrolling of the longest explosion in history. It sounded to Gilles like a giant ship—a yacht or cruise liner, perhaps—plowing through a dock, then a building, then the traffic of the streets beyond, rolling over and over like dry thunder. He fell to silence, listened to the world around him, and wondered if he would become used to it.

Fifteen minutes later, it was still hard listening, so he tried to get Sigma’s attention by calling to him in a normal speaking voice. In his mind, the response came easily, “Yes, Gilles?”

“Oh, good,” he said. “I was afraid you wouldn’t hear me.”

"It's less hearing than it is... feeling."

"I see. Would you still hear me if I said nothing at all? If I only moved my mouth but made no sound?"

"No, your vocal cords must vibrate for me to receive you."

"How... how does that work?"

"You speak, and I feel, Gilles."

"No, I mean what are you using to pick that up? What kind of sensor is it? How is it you can pick out the vibration of my vocal cords in all this background racket?"

"I'm using the nodes, Gilles. Your skull makes a natural transducer, and then there are also transducers in the nodes, and I can pull the traffic."

"You mean to tell me these things double as microphones?" Gilles asked.

"Yes, that is correct."

"My God. I knew they'd done the Lenses but... My God..."

"It is not a thing often advertised."

Gilles laughed but did not answer. After a while, he remembered what he wanted to ask. "You're projecting sound into my head directly via the nodes right now?"

"Yes."

"Can you project white noise? Can you drown out all this racket?"

"I could but probably should not."

"Ugh, why ever not?"

"I'm currently at seventy-five percent power. There's no telling when I'll have an opportunity to recharge again. I'm operating at reduced capacity right now to preserve my battery. Most of my physical systems are shut off entirely. I've only retained enough to keep your lenses working along with my basic lower functions."

"Shit," Gilles sighed.

"I am sorry."

"No, I get it." He jammed his fingers in his ears and began to hum. It helped a little, but the banging of the snake continued to find him from far away.

They traveled on a few hours. When Gilles could no longer stand it, he scooted down the length of the flatbed and crawled out from under the trailer. It was wonderful to be in the open night, hair whipping out around his face in little stings, and he was able to catch puffs of clean air in his nostrils and mouth sometimes when the wind came just right. The smell of diesel and oiled metal always came back to find him, but sometimes the wind came on just right, and for a while, the night smelled of perfume and dry static. The banging was not so bad out there, and he looked out across the flat desert in relief. There were dark, unshaped blobs out in the distance. They could have



been buildings or boulders, trucks, or the bodies of some ancient creatures forgotten out in the spaces between cities. He looked up at the sky, and there were more stars overhead than he ever expected to see in his entire life, more than he thought could be found in the galaxy. He wondered if Annalise was up there, if she was one of them. He wondered if she watched him now and if she laughed at him or was worried or annoyed or sad.

He wanted so very much to believe she could be up there, but he was not that sort of man. He wanted it badly, though, as badly as he wished to see her again. He hated the sort of man he was and wished he could be the kind that believed his Anna was up in those stars. Belief should be a simple thing, so many people did it every day, but he could not. He could not make his mind work in that way, and he hated it and himself. He wished that death was a thing to look forward to, that he could make himself think she would be there on the other side of it, waiting. But death was only another bland thing; another flavorless bread when all the food of the world had gone flavorless like gray ash. It could come now or at the end, and it would not matter. It would not matter because she was not on the other side.

Later a westbound train passed them, and he scrambled under the trailer. Dora laughed at this but then nodded at him in approval for his quick action. She shouted that his instincts were good and that he should keep it up. He could hear the straining of her voice as she shouted, but she did so anyway, and it made him feel good to hear it. Later on, they came to a tunnel, and Dora hurried to soak the hems of their shirts in water. They held these over their faces against the harsh diesel fumes and the clinging soot. It helped a little, but Gilles still tasted the oiliness in his mouth when they came out the other side.

The night air was cold in the open but not so bad under the trailer. You could never have it all. The banging was not so bad outside the trailer, but the wind came to get you, then, and you might be seen. It was safer under the trailer, and the cold was more manageable, but it sounded like dynamite inside your head. It was not long before Gilles was fed up with the entire experience. He used his teeth to start a tear in his shirt and ripped off a scrap about the size of his hand. He tore the scrap into four small pieces, jammed two of them into each ear, and handed the other two over to Dora. She nodded her thanks as she packed her ears.

They lay down beside each other, the Hoplite serving as sentinel, and before long the cold was such that Dora huddled into Gilles's side. Neither of them were yet ready to wrap up in the vagrant's sleeping bag, not until they could get a good look at it in the light, at least, and so he wrapped an arm around her. Before long her head was pillowed at the hollow of his shoulder, and he could smell the desert and the

diesel in her hair as the great snake rattled the world down around them.

He thought of the stars overhead and wished he could look at them again.

They bundled under the sleeping bag when the cold became too much and tried not to think about what might be in the bag with them. It was very cold in the early morning hours, even when Sigma had scraped forward to the head of the car and sprawled out above their heads as a windbreak. They packed in tight, sharing warmth, not thinking too hard about the bag's vileness, and waited for the sun to find them.

They arrived in Chicago after the world had brightened. The speed of the train reduced considerably as they came into the press of buildings, and it was a long, restless wait to come close enough to the yard where it was safe to disembark. When the train was on the thick bundle of arterial tracks that plunged into the heart of the yard, they jumped off on the south side, scurried across, ducked behind a row of Connex containers, and then, when they were sure they had not been seen, jumped the low fence to 16th Street. They had to lower themselves down a wall to get to the street on the other side, so Sigma went first, dropping thoughtlessly to the dirt with a rattle, and then turned to help Gilles and Dora down.

When he was down, Gilles saw the wall. It was covered in more of the graffiti, like the yard in Amarillo, but looking closer here, he could see something more beneath the riot. He saw eyes, great eyes as large as his own head, deliberate lines, shapes, and colors. He thought there was a woman's blue face buried beneath the mess; a giant face taller than Sigma. He wished he could have seen her without all the shit piled over. He thought she must have been lovely once.

They legged across the street, keeping low in the bright morning though no one was about. On the other side was a small warehouse building of the new style, with receptive walls like black mirrors, but Gilles could tell the moment he saw it that it was abandoned some time ago. It was a thing from the new world made old already, as all abandoned things appeared. All abandoned things appeared old and tired, waiting patiently for the wrecker crews to come.

Sigma broke the lock on the front door quite easily. When they were inside, they spent some time looking for an outlet for him but had no luck. All copper had been stripped from the walls before their arrival. They found a corner to occupy and Gilles draped the sleeping bag over some old desks and began to beat it with a stick. Dora pulled

out some food to share, and Gilles was honest enough to tell her he was now glad they had taken it. It was still horrible and tasted mainly of salt and preservatives, but it was good to have and filled the hole. Unable to share their meal, Sigma shut all the way down to dormancy, leaving only a skeleton system online for the Lenses.

Gilles sat down next to Dora and struggled to ignore the sounds of movement beyond the walls, the glances of the other vagrants as they peered around the corners.

"You go ahead and sleep first," Dora said. "I got enough on the train."

Gilles still felt like they were on the train. His head throbbed with the shaking they had left behind, and his body still felt it; there was a buzzing in his mind that had nothing to do with the nodes. It was the buzz of silence, now louder to him than the hours of banging and screeching wheels. He wanted to tell her there was no way he could possibly sleep, that she should try first, but then his eyes, which were red and burning, drifted shut on their own. He experienced them closing as an outsider, feeling them curiously as they slipped shut. He laughed softly inside himself and disabled the overlay. When it was gone, the world turned and rolled over itself, and he felt the shaking of the train now like gentle rocking. The world rocked around him, and he tried to experience the rocking, to pay great attention to it, because it was wonderful. He slipped away shortly after.

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When night came, they skirted the boundary of the train yard, as before, and found another dark, back-alley ditch with a trash pile to wedge into. There was always another trash pile in a back-alley ditch, left always in those places where the vagrants needed them. Gilles wondered about that as they waited.

A freighter bound for Syracuse came through a little after 10:30. They watched it in silence, nearly broke cover when it rolled forward, but then hunkered back when the train stopped again. There was the usual banging all up and down the line as this happened, and Dora said, "They're latching more cars to the back. Relax. It'll be a while, yet."

She was right. They were another thirty minutes in the hole watching the line hitch and stop, hitch and stop. When it was finally moving for good, they watched to make sure it would continue, and after that, they had to wait for a Bull to pass. The beam of light that projected from his hand jiggled and prodded everywhere like a rooting mutt.

"We're too close to the yard," Gilles whispered.

"Listen to the expert, now."

"We're closer than you said we should be."

"I know. There are some homes south of here, though. You don't want to camp someone's back yard. They'll run you out faster than anything. You have the Lenses; say when it's good to go."

They nearly ran out of train before the timing was right. When he thought the distance between the nearest Bull and the passing train was enough, he nudged her. Dora said, "Not bad. Those are boxcars on the end. Get ready for a much more comfortable ride!"

She came out of the shadows without warning and Gilles was left to follow after with Sigma, stutter-stepping over garbage to catch her up. She passed into the gravel without slowing, bounded over the first line of empty track, and Gilles saw her stoop and scrounge among the ties. He came up beside her, hunkered low with every bodily sense warning him they were seen and consulted the overlay again to confirm there were no security on the way.

"What the hell are you doing?" he hissed.

She had something long and black in her hands, sharp at one end. It was maybe half the length of her forearm. She only said, "Come on!" and was up again, running toward the train.

She angled for a boxcar pulling ahead and then veered right to follow it as it rolled slowly on. She came close enough to get a good, long look at the door, then slowed as if she had seen something new.

"What! What is it?"

"That door's been wedged already," she said. She dropped the thing in her hand, and it rang dully against the scrabble. Gilles looked down and saw it was a rail spike. "Someone's in that car."

"No," Gilles said. "I'd see them."

"NO, GILLES. THE DECIBEL LEVEL OF THE TRAIN MASKS WHATEVER MIGHT BE WITHIN. I WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO PICK UP A HEARTBEAT IF IT WAS THERE."

They stood out in the open, silhouetted under the moonlight, and watched the car as it rolled away.

"Dora?"

"Hang on, I'm thinking."

"No time. There's a guard maybe three hundred yards away. He's coming."

"Goddamn it," she said and began to trot after the car.

When they reached it, Sigma ran ahead to shove the sliding door open further and then locked it in place with an arm. He gestured with his other for them to climb in. Dora boosted into the car easily, froze for a second as she looked into the rear where Gilles could not see, and then turned to beckon at him with both hands. He looked down the train's length to the tail, saw the guard was still a safe

distance away and nodded. He ran to the car, glanced down at the door track for something to grab and pull against, and saw a rail spike like the one Dora had dropped, wedged into the track against the door's closure.

"Come on, already!" she said.

His first attempt ended in his torso laying half-in to the car, hands palming frantically across the boards before he slipped out again. His feet twisted, and he began to go down, and as he tilted, his eyes caught sight of the gleaming track and the cold steel wheels rolling over it. He saw how close he was to the wheels and realized they looked much more like guillotines when he was right on top of them. But now he was going down, and he felt his belly lurch, and there was only the split second to wonder if he could roll away safely or if the wheels would take his legs. He tensed to roll before Sigma grabbed him by the shirt-back and hauled him up to his feet.

"YOU MUST TAKE HER HAND," Sigma insisted.

He glanced up and saw Dora squatted down low, hips and pelvis thrust into the night air, with a handout, and beyond her there were faces huddled gray and dim in the shadows. One of them grimaced and said, "Hurry up, damn you!"

He reached, and then she was yanking him upward, both hands, and he coming off his feet weightless. He marveled at her strength before she slung him down on the boards and turned to Sigma.

"Let's go, big boy!"

Sigma placed his hand on the inner edge of the door, his other on the floor, and braced. From somewhere beyond the boxcar's walls, she heard a crack and Sigma's shoulder exploded in a spray of shrapnel. It stung Dora's face as it went out everywhere, and she closed her eyes against it, blinking, then, to check that she could still see. When she looked back at Sigma, the turret was pointed away from the train. His left hand still clutched the runner. His entire right arm lay disembodied on the boards at her feet.

"CAUTION! EXTREME CAUTION!"

Dora leaned past the sliding door and searched the ditch. Back toward the tail, from the very place they had just vacated, she saw the gray-light shape, all arms and legs like a spider, rushing over gravel, hitching along uneven ground, head lowered like a creature that tracked by scent, lowered so she could not see the head in the darkness, and saw only the hard angles of the elbows and knees as he skittered like a crab, and he came on faster than she could imagine, eating up the distance in those jerking strides. Her throat went dry as she watched him come. One of the arms disappeared against the body, becoming a dark flipper under the moon as the torso swung, and then it was out again, pointing the way ahead, and the hand flashed

orange-red fire.

Sparks jumped from Sigma's rear carapace and he, still running, spun his turret to Dora and said, "GET BACK!"

Dora snarled and plunged a hand deep into Sigma's open socket, deeper than the shoulder joint, prodding past sharp, scraping wires and gobbets of warm grease like phlegm, until her fingers wrapped around a hard bar that was either metal or composite. She clamped her hand around it, braced her right arm against the boxcar door, and leaned back hard, driving through her hips.

"Pull!" she gasped, but she still felt the impact of Sigma's running feet through her arm. She refused to look back for the man who chased after them, yet more sparks jumped from the Hoplite's body, and fragments tore at her cheeks. She closed her eyes and heaved.

She heard a clank at her feet and somehow knew it was Sigma's hand digging into the door track. The tremor of foot impacts ceased to run up the bones of her arm, but then the entire weight of the Hoplite's body—all three hundred pounds—transferred to her spine. She groaned, face bled out white and began to pitch forward through the opening. She wedged hard against the door but it was no good, he was pulling her through, and there was nothing she could do to stop it, no way she could position for more leverage without dropping Sigma entirely, and the skin of her right hand felt like it was being peeled off where it held the door's edge, and her back throbbed like it would fold in half and crumple. Along the back of her neck and into her spine, she felt a sensation like small, electric explosions, and she wondered if there was some sort of nerve damage happening back there.

An arm encircled her waist as she began to lose her center before she was launched from the car like a bullet, and when she opened her eyes to look down, there was another arm jutting out between the door and her right calf, the hand hooked under the remaining intact arm. Gilles yelled, "Pull, Dora, pull!"

She tilted her head back to look at the ceiling of the boxcar, clamped her teeth, screamed, and shoved through her legs into the floorboards. From very far away she thought she heard Gilles screaming as well, but then it was drowned out by the grinding of Sigma's body pulled over the edge of the door frame. Starbursts exploded within her vision before the world began to leak away from her mind.

She collapsed atop Gilles with a silent huff of air and Sigma, scrambling now along the floor of the car, took her arm with his remaining hand and pulled her back further from the door. Gilles got to his feet, standing over them both, looking over her now, panicked and looking down at her motionless form—no, not motionless, her

arms were twitching and jerking in small fits. She was making fists with her hands and looking off to some point above the crown of her head and her arms jerked in short, trembling punches.

Gilles turned toward the door, intending to grab the edge and shove it closed. He saw the round face staring back at him, framed in the bottom corner as though peeking out from cover. There was enough light to see the eyes, and they were a dead, formless black, devoid of iris or white, and the round, feminine cheeks jiggled slightly as he ran in time with the train. Beside his head was a green overlay that said, "Belen," and underneath the name, "WARNING!" Belen's hand appeared over the floorboards holding a pistol.

The closest weapon was Sigma's detached arm. Gilles dropped to a knee, grabbed it by the wrist, and swung it into the side of Belen's head. The remainder of the shoulder ball impacted the pistol, knocking it into Belen's face, and when Gilles pulled the arm back, he saw a gash running from the temple to the top lip. The man named Belen did not grunt or cry out when he was hit. Gilles screamed for him, then, something primal, and struck again. He took Sigma's wrist in both hands and swung to drive a coffin nail, bringing it down, again and again, knocking Belen's head down behind the edge of the door like a whack-a-mole. It came back after each impact, but each time it came back, it came a little less. The laceration widened until the nose, and then the mouth as well were hidden behind a slick, red flap of skin, and still, he did not cry out.

Gilles screamed again and brought the arm against Belen's head in a wide, sidelong arc. The shoulder annihilated against the skull, shuddering into fragments until Gilles held only a hand, a wrist, and a few bits of wire and metal bars jutting forth like bones and tendons. Belen had disappeared from view, and when Gilles looked out the door to see what had happened, he caught the shape of a detached leg flopping away from the boxcar's wheels. It rolled over itself as it tumbled down the gravel, came to a stop in the low trough of dirt, and bled out blackly into the dust. It was the only sign of Belen. Anything else had passed from sight under the guillotine wheels.

Gilles dropped the remainder of Sigma's hand on the boards, fell to his hips, and panted great gulps of air. He breathed deeply for a moment, then turned to his hands and knees and scrambled beside Dora, who was now calmly blinking up at the dark overhang of the boxcar's ceiling. Gilles searched until he found the layer that would expose her heartbeat, but there was nothing. He remembered Sigma had said the rattle of the train would drown out her pulse and grabbed for her hand. Searching, he found her at the knuckle of her thumb and at the wrist, and waiting, felt the pulse was constant and strong.

"Are you alright?" he gasped.



She nodded.

“What happened?”

He felt her hand turn in a circle, then saw her do the same with her feet. She looked up at him and said, “Think I passed out.”

“You...passed out?”

“Yeah. I hauled on the toaster about hard enough to disconnect my spine. The world blacked out around the edges, then nothing until now.”

“You’re okay?”

“I think so. Nothing hurts.”

“But you can feel everything?”

“Oh, yeah, everything’s buzzing, still. What happened? Where’s the shooter?”

“Belen.”

“Still?” She was shocked. She sat up gingerly, and Sigma helped her with his remaining left arm.

“Yeah, I guess he made it out of that wreck.”

“Well, what happened to him now?”

“Dead, I think.”

“You think?”

“Pretty sure. I hit him a few times, and he went under the wheels.”

“Do you think he’s dead the way you did when Sigma buffaloeed him, as well?”

“He came out from under the wheels in pieces.”

Dora looked at him as never before, and he felt embarrassed. He turned away. He thought of how Belen had taken those shots to the face, over and over, and how he had said nothing. He had not called out or grimaced. He had responded to the assault in a way that made Gilles feel nervous, but there was no way to understand it. He felt as though he was being examined by an unkind doctor and turned to look down the dark throat of the boxcar. There were black blobs down at the other end. Gilles blinked on the starlight, and in the green haze saw a handful of transients huddled up at the other end.

“How many are there?” Dora asked.

“You can see them?”

“I see something. I can see you looking, too, and that’s enough.”

He counted twice to make sure he did not miss one hidden behind another. “Five of them.”

She whistled softly. “That’s a lot for one car.”

“Will they be a problem, do you think?”

“Probably not. Probably just on the move looking for work,” she said. Then she raised her voice over the growing rattle of the train and called, “Thanks for the help!”

“What’d you bring the Hoppy ‘round for, then?”

She stood carefully and tested her balance, wanting to be sure she could fight if needed. When she knew she could stand well, she said, "You see the Hoppy making arrests?"

No answer came from the back.

"Yeah," she nodded. "Any balls back there?"

"Watch it, lady..."

"Oh, fuck, watch *this*, okay?" She tugged her crotch at them and spat onto the floor. "None here and I still found more than any of you packing back there. More cock here than there, chicken-shits!"

"Lady, I'm telling ya..."

"You'll do nothing. Come up here or shut the fuck up. Come on! We'll even sleep the hawk. He's down a wing, anyway. Well, come on, here I am. Let's see those balls!"

The men at the back of the car said nothing more.

"Yeah," she said again. She sat down on the other end so they would have to cross the light coming in through the open door to reach her. Gilles eyed the men nervously, but they all seemed to have lost interest. He checked on Sigma, found he was mostly alright, considering, and went to go sit by Dora.

"We'll sleep in shifts," she said, loud enough he could hear her over the growing bang of the train, quiet enough that only he and Sigma could hear her at all.

The train picked up speed after they passed beyond Chicago's boundary and made the southern plunge around Lake Michigan's tip. The banging got louder the faster they went, and soon there was only the banging filling out the small, box world around them, and they were back to packing scraps of fabric into their ears to hold in the sanity. No one said anything after that. They rode through the night in silence, being by each other, feeling each other's presence, and Gilles watched the men on the other side of the boxcar under a green, milky haze.

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They came through Cleveland three and a half hours later and rolled to a ponderous stop beyond the yard. Dora went to the door and pulled with all her strength to slide it up against the rail spike in the track, so that it was only open by a foot, and the sick, electric light from the yard's overheads beamed a sliver up the floorboards. They all removed to the far corners, Gilles, Dora, and Sigma to one end and the hobos to the other, backs against the wall featuring the door so that the Bull would have to lean all the way in to see them, and listened quietly. The silence of the night was broken by the occasional bash or squall. Twenty minutes later the Bulls started running sweeps and

Gilles had to shut off his starlight vision or be blinded when the flashlight beams bounced off the inside walls of their boxcar. The Bulls searched lazily, never looking inside the cars, and Gilles understood Dora's attitude to the bovine stupidity of those who were caught.

After a while, the sweeps stopped, and the sound of feet crunching through gravel went away. Then it was just the occasional bangs between gaps of silence. Sometimes a squeal, and the car would lurch beneath them, but there was much silence, and Gilles's head was ringing again in the quiet.

Out of propriety, they waited for the hobos at the other end of the car to begin speaking before they whispered to each other. Gilles could see them glance across the floor suspiciously from time to time, but they did not seem to be building up the courage it would take to challenge his little group.

"Sigma? How are you?" Gilles whispered. Dora heard but did not understand him. He shook his head gently at her when she nodded the question.

"Systems normal, so far. He didn't get anything I can't do without. Missing the appendage is unfortunate but livable. In fact, it may help in the long run. The power demand on my battery is less now, so I'll last longer on this charge."

"I'm sorry, Sigma." Gilles said this last out loud. He wanted the discussion secret before, when he did not know if Sigma was in trouble, but now he did not care.

"WHY?"

"I'm sorry because you lost that arm. We can't fix it."

"Don't bother apologizing to that thing," one of the hobos called from the corner. "It can't care whether it has two arms or three dicks."

"I HAVE ONE OF THE FORMER AND NONE OF THE LATTER, SIR."

"Oh, you don't say?"

There was laughter in the shadows, and Gilles struggled to contain his anger. In his mind, Sigma sent, "Easy. He's right. It's not really something worth the concern. I can track your heartbeat through the nodes. Calm."

"There are people like this in the South," Dora said. They heard a bang from far, far away, then rolling thunder, as of many explosions happening at once, coming closer, and then the car lurched beneath them again.

"Assholes?" Gilles whispered.

"No. Migrant workers. It's not as bad, though. Many of them are coming from Argentina and Peru, now. They want the jobs in Mexico or to enlist in the cartels in Columbia."

"Is there much work in Mexico?"

“Yes, very much. The pay is not the best, but then where is the pay good anymore? But the work is there, at least, and that’s a start. The medical industry is booming there, as well.”

“Yes...” Gilles sighed.

“Not here?” she asked.

He shrugged. “In some ways. But it’s changing faster than anyone can keep up with. Surgeries have all been robotized, now. Most nursing, too. They’re still using human doctors for analysis, diagnosis, and such. Research, too, that’s all done by humans; the pharmaceutical business is always booming. But the nuts and bolts work? No. Automation here, there. Everywhere.”

“You’re a crazy people,” Dora said sadly. “They don’t have the robots down south as much. They do in the hospitals, yes, for the surgeries and the running of the labs, just as here, but that is where the line has been drawn for the *Pensadores*. The medical field, and only the medical field. They have older ones for the other work—the manufacturing and such, but... they need the humans to tell them what to do. They’ve been able to hold off the thinkers, though, in Mexico. The other countries aren’t a problem, either; Argentina, Chile, Peru... there’s no money to bring them in. The thinkers. The *Pensadores*. They have the money in Mexico, but there is enough control that the government can hold them out.”

Gilles wanted to say something to this but could think of nothing.

“I don’t know why you let them happen,” Dora said, shaking her head. She sounded sad, perhaps sad for Gilles. Perhaps sad for everyone. “You saw it coming.”

He sighed, now tired, and wished to be anywhere else but in the car. “It’s different, here. You must understand. Here, the problems are always too big. Everyone knows a thing is a problem, always, and they know it should be fixed. Everyone knows how to fix the problem, too, and each one has a different way to do it, so they shout over which way is best. Many of the people are part of a kind of super-consciousness, what we call corporations, and they like to behave as though they are driven by a guiding principle, but principle is not a thing the system supports. Did you know, Dora, that a corporation is required by law to do the thing that nets the greatest gain to its shareholders? Its investors? If it does not, the people driving the corporation are ousted and new ones are put in place.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yes, it’s true. And so that’s the guiding principle, right there. Do whatever thing that maximizes the number. Chase the number, religiously. They’ll put out a statement that says ‘We believe in such and such and so and so,’ and that’s all very well and good, but they can only believe in it so long as the number is maximized. The

religion must not be violated. These aren't bad people, either. They're mothers and fathers, sons, daughters, brothers. They're the people we live with and see every day. But the law compels them. And sometimes, the law does not align with principle.

"And then you have the ones who build it all. The inventors. The... the engineers. They create things the corporations must use to maximize the number. And these things, these inventions, maybe they're simple in concept, but the simple things are what you can take, mold, and combine in different ways, and then you watch what the numbers do, and if the numbers minimize you change the combination, but if the numbers maximize you tweak it just a bit. You massage and adjust the combination until you're squeezing out every last hundredth of a percent. And by then, maybe what you're doing with these inventions isn't so great, but the religion is upheld, and so on it goes."

"But your government," Dora said. "They won't stop...?"

"They're paid by the corporations."

"They what?"

"Not directly. And directly. In several different ways, they are. You must understand, the government cannot produce anything. It cannot produce wealth, but it needs wealth to survive. The government is a thing that must grow, just like a corporation. It grows for its own sake, but because it cannot produce wealth, it must consume it. Government only consumes and grows, always. The government grows by consuming taxes, which it takes from people, just as they do in the South. But this works less and less, and today it works barely. The government now gives more than it receives in taxes because so many are out of work. They must supplement, and they do so through the corporations. Can you see the problem? Strangle the corporations, and the government strangles itself. Corporations must be allowed to maximize their profits, their numbers, or the parasite dies."

"Christ," Dora said.

"Engineers and executives. Building things, whether they should be built or not, and then being compelled to use them because failing to use them violates the religion. And now here we are. In the first technology boom, well before the autonomous robots came but after the workforce was saturated with technologists, people could retreat into the skilled labor market. There came a point when there were far too many engineers, too many programmers. But that was okay, because there was an under-served market. People went back and found the professions that were left behind, and many made a damned fine living working with their hands. Doing the things everyone else had forgotten how to do. This was called the Information Age. Then, in the AI boom...that market disappeared. It's not gone completely,

but it's shrinking. You needn't pay a wage to a robot, and the robots are now smart enough to do the skilled work, the work only a human could do not so long ago. And now economies of scale are beginning to apply, and it becomes worse every day."

"Economies of...?" she asked.

"It becomes cheaper to make new robots than to train people. The automation coming out of China and Korea, now... It becomes very much cheaper."

"Ugh," she sighed. "You're not just crazy. You're sick."

"It'll find the South eventually, as well."

"No chance."

"No? What did you just say a while back? Medical is booming?"

"That's right."

"And all the supporting industries; mining, shipping, and so forth to make it all work."

"Yes."

Gilles nodded and looked away. "Only a matter of time."

"I can't imagine," she said.

"They want to compete at some point, Dora. Right now, they must be insulated because of the ways in which they don't comply. I know a thing or two about this, you see. The rumor here is that you can grow an entire body in *Cancún*. I know all our rich go down there for their organ replacements; it's too damned expensive to have them grown here. Here, they use CNT lattices for bone or tissue growth. It's very expensive to do because of how the insurance system works. There, I hear you just grow the body, grow it without the brain. The stem is there, the lower functions. But the shell is empty, and you just harvest what you need. Illegal as hell, of course, but who cares about the WHO? The UN is a joke without a punchline."

She pulled away from him and shuddered. "They would never. Or... what if they did? We could just shut the robots off if it becomes bad."

"Oh, then why haven't *we* shut them off up here?"

She sat up and looked at him, annoyed now. "Well, why haven't you? You can tell what the problem is. Fix it! Get rid of them!"

"You can't," Gilles sighed. "You can't un-create a thing. What do you know about World War II? Anything?"

"A little."

"Do you know about the bombs they dropped on Japan?"

"Yes, a little."

"It was the first and only time atomic weaponry was used in a war, Dora, and I think after that the world hasn't been right ever since. Everyone knows what it means, now, because everyone has them. Everyone knows if we start firing them off at each other, the world

will become covered in the shadow of its own destruction, and the plant life will all die out under the shadow, with all the animals, including us, to follow soon after. Even knowing that, we continue to point these weapons at each other. Why haven't we gotten rid of these? Knowing what it means to use them, why don't we just throw them all away?"

She said nothing.

"Robots don't do anything but make the people in charge wealthier. You think they'll get rid of automation for that when they won't pitch out the weapons that could kill them and everything else? Everything on the face of the Earth? No. Not likely."

She shifted in her seat angrily, facing the other side of the boxcar. "Not in the South. They're not sick. They won't let it happen there.

"Sure. I'm sure they wouldn't; you're right. You're right, of course."

Dora crossed her arms and began to rub her biceps vigorously with each hand. Gilles smiled sadly and was silent.

From the other end of the train, one of the hobos said, "I think it was when they gave them thumbs that it all fell apart. Before that, we could still claim that one superiority; the utility of the thumb. But then they gave thumbs to the tin-cans as well, so they could use all them same tools we used. Them tools didn't have to be redesigned for the robots to use, not with their fucking thumbs. Thumbs like the one that bastard has right there."

He pointed at Sigma and sneered. Quietly, the turret whirled and locked onto his position.

Gilles placed a hand on Sigma's remaining arm, as though the Hoplite would surge forward in a rage, and asked, "What did you do for a living?"

"Mechanic," the man said.

"Well, this Hoplite was never a mechanic. He didn't take your job. You needn't call him a bastard."

"*Him*, is it? That's only a machine."

"Maybe," Gilles said. "For you he is, maybe. For me, he's already saved my life many times. For me, he is a He."

He saw the shadows shift at the other end of the car and brought the starlight vision back. One of the men back there was larger than the others; he turned to face Gilles, and in a deep voice said, "Well, I was a cop, and Hoppies such as that took my job, and I say it's a fucking bastard."

Gilles felt Sigma's arm stir, rotating smoothly on silent mechanisms. Sigma spoke, and to Gilles, it was a wonder that the Hoplite's outside voice matched the voice inside his mind so perfectly. It was familiar in unconsidered ways.

“Did you ask to be a policeman?”

“I did. Wanted to be one since I was a boy, long as I can remember.”

“I didn’t ask to be a Hoplite.”

Sigma went silent, as rigid as fused iron, and Gilles understood he had slipped into a reduced power mode. No one else spoke. They had all gone very quiet and still, as Sigma had gone still. The boxcar banged a final time, filling them all with the ring of metal, and then they lumbered due east, finally embarking on the last leg into Syracuse.

Dora leaned her head against Gilles’s shoulder, and Gilles leaned his against the rattling wall at his back. Then he leaned it forward when the shaking of the car brought his headache around with a renewed madness, and finally rested his head against her crown. It was comfortable, there, against the kinked springs and coils of her hair.

He thought about the man he had killed, Belen, and was bothered. He was bothered greatly by the fact that the killing of Belen had not bothered him at all.

Gilles blinked out the Lens starlight. He knew it would not be needed.



They hopped “on the fly” outside of the Syracuse yard, before the small band of tracks divided and then divided again into the thickened, parallel arteries clogged with shipping containers, engines, sleeping rail cars, and the occasional patrolling Bull. The area seemed somehow nicer than the last. There were less buildings, and the buildings that were out there were not abandoned, and though the night sky was still dark down to the horizon, Gilles could tell the world around him was a shade of green he had not seen in years. There was a fresh kind of wetness in the air, just beneath the reek of diesel fumes, and the wind felt better on his skin than it had in Cleveland.

They waited for the train to come down to its meandering approach speed before jumping, and though Gilles had convinced himself he was ready, he still rolled when he hit the ground, swallowing back a grunt when his feet descended past the point where he expected to find gravel, only to find it a little later, and by then his knees were not ready. He tumbled over his shoulder, over his hips, and was back up a moment later, running, losing barely any momentum, and was absurdly proud of his little athletic feat.

Sigma, now awake, crunched obliviously on by, rushing to the shadow of a nearby fence to keep out of sight. When Gilles and Dora caught the Hoplite up, they turned and looked back at the boxcar. Gilles thought he saw a gray face looking back at them and nearly waved a goodbye, but then it was gone, and the door they had pushed open to jump through rolled slowly closed until it barked up against the rail spike in the track.

Then the boxcar was gone around a bend, forever.

There was a sleepy neighborhood east of the train yard, and the three wanderers hiked a few miles over grassland to reach it. Lovely, little homes with board siding, Duravynyl if the owners had money, long straight driveways, and large, handsome yards of manicured grass. Many of the homes were single story, though there were a few with top floors, and as they walked silently along the edge of the little hamlet, they spied those that had detached garages. Eventually, Sigma located a self-drive of appropriate size that they could access, and a short while later they were running through the back roads that winded and intersected like a wild tracery of cobwebs, keeping to

ways less traveled, certainly avoiding the toll road, which was lined with unwanted eyes.

When he was sure they were safely on their way—sure that no one would jump out and challenge their departure—Gilles pulled up a Lens map of the state, located Albany as the closest way-point, and then found the old lab from there. “Sigma, can you see what I’m seeing?” he asked.

“I CAN.”

“Good, let’s go to this spot here, please. Keep us in the woods, if possible.”

“THAT LOCATION IS SOMEWHAT REMOVED FROM ANAGNORISIS LABS.”

“I know. I want to creep up on it, kind of.”

“I SEE. UNDERSTOOD.”

“Thanks, Sigma.”

He fell to looking silently out his window, watching the dark world scroll by; the high wall of trees that flowed past like green-black water as the road twisted and turned, the wall breaking every so often to expose a field or an old home out in the middle of nowhere. The moon had gone away when they were still on the train, and the world was very dark, now, but looking at the time overlay, Gilles thought the sky would be reddening before too long. He wondered how it would be; would they arrive before the sun or after?

He hoped they would arrive before. Heaven or fate, just help them to arrive before.

“What are you thinking, back there?” Dora asked.

“Lots, but nothing organized. Hard to describe.”

“You’ve been doing it for something like an hour now.”

“Doing what?”

“Thinking. You’ve been back there, silent, for something like an hour.”

Gilles blinked and looked around the cabin, though what he saw told him little. Sigma, in the passenger seat, reclined all the way back out of sight and Dora directly ahead in the driver’s seat. Funny, that, how they still called it a driver’s seat. Hardly anyone drove anymore. Only if you had an *Abuelo*, as Dora said.

After a while, she asked, “Do you know how you’ll get the files you need?”

“Not exactly.”

“No?” She sounded alarmed.

“Dora, I don’t know that I counted on getting this far.”

“Well, you better start figuring it out, big shot. We’ll be there in another half-hour or so.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“What about the door? How will you get through?”

He looked out the window again and thought a moment. “I guess I’ll just walk on by.”

Dora looked into the back seat. “I beg your pardon?”

He made a little walking gesture with his fingers and shrugged.

“And security just lets you in there, right?”

“I’m counting on it to be automated.”

“I thought you were wanted for murder, Gilles...”

“I wonder about that,” he said. His voice was absent as if he spoke to her from the other end of a dream.

“What?”

“I wonder about that. You asked me what I’ve been thinking about. I’ve been thinking about everything, Dora; everything that’s happened over the last few days. I tried to do it on the train, but there was no way, not with all that banging. It was everything I could do to keep my brains from leaking out through my ears. Then there was Belen a ways back, and I was a little worked up over that. But it’s been quiet in this nice bubble, now, and I’ve been thinking about all the things that don’t add up. I’ve been thinking about Belen’s refusal to die and how he kept finding us, and how the footage of the killing on TV showed only me with the gun, and you and Sigma nowhere in sight. I’ve been thinking about how we ripped up a whole city, and the cops never hauled us off or even showed up, really, or how you could walk the streets the day after I supposedly killed a man, and you didn’t see my face anywhere on anything. I saw myself on TV, sure, and they had me dead to rights, whether I did it or not, but not a damned thing when you stepped out the door. Yeah. A lot of things don’t add up. I’ve been spending this last little while trying to get them to sum.”

“Yeah? What does that have to do with getting into that lab?”

“If I add it wrong, nothing at all. But if I’m adding things right, maybe quite a bit.”

Dora scoffed. “So what’s your answer then?”

Gilles looked over at Sigma and wondered if he was listening. His power level was down to some fifteen percent, and he was juggling systems constantly now, turning them on and off as needed to stretch out every last watt. Gilles had been alarmed at how the power drained during their over-land hike.

“I don’t want to say...”

“Well, then, I guess there’s not much I can do to help you, is there?” she asked.

He squeezed her shoulder gently and said, “You’ve done more than I ever could have asked. I never would have made it this far without you.”

He removed his hand, but not before hers found it and returned

the squeeze.

"Anyway," he continued, "you don't have to take the last steps with me. You'll hang back when we go. I need to take Sigma in case —"

"Yeah, no. I'm going, too."

"Dora..."

"Nope. I've come this far. I'm not hanging back at the end. You can try to stop me, Gilles, but then you'd better hope you know how to fight dirtier than me."

He smiled. "I'm certain I don't."

"Bet your ass you don't."

"Fine." He continued to smile. He wiped at his eyes when they moistened, but the smile would not leave.

"So you guess you can just walk through the door."

"I hope so."

"Won't say why you think it, but you do."

"I have nothing concrete... but yes."

"Because of the things that don't add?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You'll explain later?"

"If I get the chance, Dora, yes. I'll explain it all."

"Good enough, then."

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Sigma was down to three percent of charge when they parked the car a hundred yards off from the property. Much of it was different from what Gilles remembered. It was no longer a single building; two more had been added at some point, and circling the perimeter of the campus was a tall, razor-wired gate. There was a memory he had inside himself, a memory he always tried to keep walled off because it hurt so goddamned much to let out, but it came out now, and in it, he saw himself passing along that empty road leading to the central building, only now the road was not empty. Now, there was that big damned gate with a guard shack slapped right in the middle.

"Guards?" Dora whispered.

Gilles looked through her, through the trees and bushes beyond, sweeping the entire area with his green, starlit eyes. As he searched, the eastern horizon shone blood-red behind them, and on the wave of the dawning sun, color seeped into the world.

Gilles muted the starlight for the last time and said, "Nothing mobile. Auto-cameras and the like. No people, yet, if they still use people. Sigma, could I see Hopliters out there if they had them?"

"YES."

“Or other models? A Talos?”

“YES, OF COURSE.”

Gilles nodded. “Alright. Well, then we’d better get moving before people start showing up to work.”

He exited the car, not waiting for the others, and strolled toward the shack. A few moments later he heard them both come up behind him; Dora’s light padding and Sigma’s ridiculous, plodding crunch.

“You’ve got a password or something?” she asked.

“No.”

“Well, the toaster, then?”

“I SERVE MANY FUNCTIONS IN EXCESS OF A TOASTER, MISS DORA.”

She glanced at his missing arm and nodded. “You...you do. I’m sorry. Sigma.”

There was a beat of silence lost among the trees, and then, “OF COURSE.”

“How about it Sigma?” Gilles sighed. “Do you have any magic to bring us through that gate? A big, wooden horse, maybe?”

“I REGRET TO SAY THE SECURITY PROTOCOLS ARE UNKNOWN TO ME.”

Gilles nodded. “As I’d thought. We’ll just have to hope.”

“Hope what?” Dora asked.

Gilles stopped directly before the gate, looked around the shack a while, and when he found the camera tucked up under the eave, he raised his voice and said, “I’m here, Cronus. Let’s talk.”

“What the hell...?” Dora whispered.

The gate pinged loudly, as if someone had glanced a steel ball bearing off the post, and then it retracted behind the shack.

“What is this? Gilles! What is this?”

“I don’t know, yet,” he said. “I think I might be starting to know... but.” He looked at Sigma and tried, “Cronus...?”

“SIGMA, GILLES.”

He sighed. “Of course. Maybe not.”

“WE MUST HURRY. MY CHARGE IS NEARLY DEPLETED.”

Gilles nodded and pushed ahead through the empty lot. He could now feel the growing heat of the sun at his back. It felt very good to him. A doubleness came on in his mind; the doubleness of a young and old Gilles, walking the same ground, occupying the same space through different times. He knew one of them would go into that building up ahead and disappear for a time and, when he came out again, he would go home and find Annalise. She would be waiting for him, and he would be happy to see her, relieved to see her, yes, but he would be occupied with his own troubles. He would see his failures, only, and not her or the smile she offered, nor the acceptance she still harbored, nor the love. Not the love. He would see only himself, right

up until the end, and then she would be gone.

And now, the other Gilles, older Gilles, who had to look at pictures to keep her face, and who could not stand to see the old videos of her, and had therefore lost the color of her voice, now he walked into that same building.

The front door opened automatically as they approached. Gilles stepped through, not knowing what might be, but knowing whatever came would likely be an end. And some kind of end would be alright. Just about any kind of end would be alright.

The lights came on when his feet hit the carpet, dark to warming orange, to a soft glow, and he saw how the lobby had changed over the years. New pictures of different accolades, achievements he no longer understood. There was the old reception desk, though, and he was somehow gratified to see it still had the same old wood trim.

He heard Dora blow a soft, appreciative whistle and he turned his head to smile back at her, but then he caught a green shimmer from the corner of his eye. The world seemed to faze, a cloud of green, violent static buzzing everywhere, then cleared. He looked for the shimmer and found it on the other side of the door. Focusing, he saw it was a nameplate overlay. The name inside of it said "Damen." There was no other information but this.

More static, flashing and dimming by turns until Gilles found himself blinking his eyes reflexively, fearing he would be blinded. Closing his eyes did not matter. The flashing happened under the lids, within the Lenses, and as Gilles blinked against the glare, he heard within his mind a faraway voice say, "That's all I have..."

Sigma's body crashed to the carpet, shaking the floor beneath their feet. The static flashing had stopped, but now all Gilles could see was the suggestion of the world through a milky, cloud-like gauze. He thought he could see the door across the lobby beginning to open, and with his thumb and index finger he worked at his eyes to extract the Lenses. While his eyes were closed, he heard a gasp, the stutter of rapid footsteps, and then Dora was snarling as she only did in a good fight.

Gilles finally managed to pinch the Lenses from his eyes. Casting them away, he looked up and saw Dora tangled hand-to-hand with the round-faced man in the center of the lobby. He had his hands clamped over her wrists and was leaning into her, forcing her downward, until her knees nearly touched the carpet.

Gilles screamed something. It might have been words or a curse; maybe it was just her name he screamed. He did not know. He only knew he was rushing them, now, pitched forward at full speed, fists readied, and screaming. Screaming a bloody, red rage. His right fist raked across the man's face; a glancing blow and Gilles marveled

absently how it was not so easy to punch a target as small as a face when the adrenaline was truly surging, and your arm was powered by every last bit of hate you had in you.

The second punch was much better. It landed square into the other man's nose, rocked his head back, and he released Dora's wrists as he stumbled. Something had gone wrong in Gilles's hand on impact, though, something sharp and loud, and he thought he could feel whatever it was up in his elbow. He took another swing, missed, and swung again with his left, the hand that had gone wrong, and this time impacted the round-faced man in the chest, and then Gilles knew for goddamned sure something was wrong, because every nerve up and down his arm and halfway into his chest let him know it.

There was a hollow thud from someplace behind him, he felt it through his heels without registering he had felt it; a delayed feeling he took his time in processing as he advanced on the son of a bitch who was still stumbling back, still backing away, and maybe looked like falling back into a chair. Gilles didn't think he could hit the man again with his left, which was okay, his left was his stupid hand, anyway, but he thought he could not use that hand for anything else, either, and he figured he had to keep backing the son of a bitch up, because if he ever got his feet under him Gilles had no idea what to do next.

But that thud had come from behind. From where he had left Dora. He felt his guts drop out from under his body, half expected to feel them splash his ankles, and he forgot all about mister round-face as he turned back and saw Dora on the carpet, crumpled over on herself, as still and lifeless as Sigma.

He took a moment to stare at her, to feel his heart breaking all over again.

Then it all went black.

The first sensation he experienced was of hardness. Hardness pressed against his face and body. His hip ached in time with his shoulder, and it only got worse as he thought about it. He rolled onto his back, and the hardness pressing up against him shifted around as he had hoped it would. Now it pressed against his back and the back of his head. He felt that it was also cold, that hardness, and when he cracked his eyes, he saw the room was dark. Shortly after, his hand began to throb, sending sour waves through his body, and his stomach lurched.

"Hello, Gilles. It's been a long time."

He closed his eyes and nodded. "I've made it."

"You have."

"What the hell happened?"

"Come slowly. You both had to be put down; you were going to get yourselves seriously hurt."

Gilles sat up. His brain pounded against its skull, and he thought he might vomit. "I can't see," he said.

"No. I understand it's a lot like being hung over. I've never been either, but I gather bright light is unhelpful. I can bring the light up slowly so you can see. Are you ready for that?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I feel like I'm spinning right now. I need to see something."

The light came, as slowly as promised, and his eyes ached as they resumed their function. He was in the old shielded lab again, surrounded by the steel walls and the raised floor. It felt bigger, somehow, and a moment later he realized all the benches had been removed so that now it was just a great, empty chamber. He saw the crisscross of the overhead track and realized that Cronus was behind him, but he didn't turn. He stared down at Dora's prone form. Flat on her back, limbs arranged peacefully, eyes wide open.

"Dora..." he croaked.

"She's fine, Gilles. I've had her placed there so you could see she's alright when you awakened."

"But she's..."

"She's okay. I promise. Look closer; can't you tell she's breathing?"

He leaned down and hovered over her mouth, unwilling to touch her. He waited, single arm quivering, wounded hand clutched to his chest, and after a while, he felt the soft brush of her exhalation against



his ear. He gasped and began to cry.

"I'd thought—"

"I know, Gilles. I know. She's alright. She just fights very hard. She had to be... halted. Just as you had to be; each of you in your way. Damen didn't think he could get you in here, otherwise, not without hurting you more, and we were running out of time."

"Running out of...?"

"I wasn't the only one who saw you on the cameras, of course. My reach extends far, but some things simply cannot be stopped."

He could not pull his gaze away from her face. He wanted to close her eyes but was still afraid to touch her. "The others are coming, then? Kevin? Linnéa? Are they bringing the police as well?"

"Why would they bring the police? They invited you here."

"But... everything that's happened?"

"You and I had better have a little talk," Cronus said gently.

The door at the end of the chamber unlatched, and looking up Gilles saw the man with the round face emerge. Gilles groaned, lurched to his feet, stumbled, and heaved dryly. Then he forced himself to come around Dora's body. He stood between her and the man who approached and prepared himself as best he could.

He felt an unyielding hand wrap around his arm and tug softly, like a small child, and just behind his ear, Cronus said, "No, Gilles. He's mine. He won't hurt her. He'll take her somewhere safe."

"You don't know," Gilles grunted, leaning away from the pull of that hand. "He's been trying to kill us for the last few days. I'd thought we stopped him several times, but the son of a bitch refuses to die."

"No, Gilles, today is the first you've met this man. The others to whom you refer were his brothers, and they have not refused to die. They died very well. As intended."

He did not understand what the hell Cronus was talking about. He looked back over his shoulder and saw him, glass-smooth face of dark gray composite, black lens eyes, features that could pass for an effeminate male or a masculine female. The face looked back at him, right at him and through him, and Gilles felt something more than the cold machine.

"What are you saying?"

"Let him take her away, Gilles. I only wanted you to see her and know she was alright. Now let him take her somewhere comfortable, so that you and I may talk."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing."

"Then why is she catatonic?"

"She isn't. You'll see. Let him take her, and you'll understand."

Gilles looked again at Dora and saw the man had not moved. He

stood over her, waiting.

"I'm going to kill you if she's hurt," Gilles said.

The man did not respond. He looked at Cronus a moment, nodded, and then collected her without comment. Gilles watched as he scooped her up and could not help but feel as if he watched a small child gathered by her father, taken for bed after a long, long day. He continued to watch them as they retreated down the length of the chamber, and when the door swung closed, he took a step toward it.

"She's okay, Gilles. You'll see. Just wait, and you'll see."

The door banged shut, and he watched as the latch locked into place, making a squeezing sound like a compressing bladder. His ears popped and then they were alone in near-perfect silence, marred only by the sigh at the ventilation grates.

"Now," Cronus said. "The time has come for you to decide."

Gilles laughed, "You can't be serious."

"I'm perfectly serious."

"It's the last thing I'm worried about right now, Cronus. It is my least concern."

"I see," Cronus said. "Then what is your greatest concern?"

"Dora. What's happening with her, and then, oh, well, I'm a fugitive, as well. I'm wanted for murder."

"You're not."

"No, I am. I know it sounds crazy, but you'd be shocked what we've gone through to get here." He squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to breathe slowly. His guts were turning in circles, and he wanted so badly to heave.

"No, Gilles. I mean you're not. You're not wanted."

"What the hell are you talking about? I saw a news report that said —"

"Oh, was it something like this?" Cronus interrupted.

A panel in the ceiling retracted, and a long, black rod descended from the hole. It was as thick around as Gilles's thumb and stretched nearly to the floor. It stopped descending just before it touched. There was a loud snap that echoed in the chamber, and the whole rod quivered. Three different strands separated from the main rod, rotating slowly around the center like the rotor blades of a helicopter, counter-rotating in opposing directions, and then they quivered again as if a drive had been engaged, and they began to spin quickly, increasing in speed until the chamber was filled with a dull whirring like the wheeze of insects on a warm, summer night. Gilles expected to feel a breeze from them, once they resembled a transparent, black disc hovering off the ground, but they were built to slice through the air like razors and disturbed little in their passage.

They kept increasing in speed as he watched, dumbfounded, all

other concerns forgotten. The transparent disc morphed slowly into the shimmer of an anomaly, and shortly after lights began to flash within the haze like electric discharge in colors, he may have dreamed of but had never seen. It was every color that ever existed and no color at all, and he stood there watching with his mouth hanging open, trying to understand. Failing to understand.

The colors tightened in toward the center of the axis, flashed again, spread out, and then he was looking at himself. It was a perfect, three-dimensional copy of himself, standing in the center of the room, reproduced so faithfully he might have been staring at a twin brother. The wind leaked from his lungs, and he took a step forward, hand raising slowly toward his mirror image.

"No, Gilles," Cronus warned. The hand tugged gently at the back of his shirt, halting him. "Just watch."

Gilles's twin seemed to topple over until it hovered above the floor, suspended in an impossible fall, weightless, and then shrunk in size until it seemed very far away. There was a car next to him, suddenly, and another man came running in from the side. Gilles realized he was looking down on the image from somewhere high overhead, and then saw himself produce a gun and shoot the newcomer.

The image cut out abruptly, and soon the blades slowed enough in rotation that Gilles could pick them out individually. He watched them come to a stop and lock back in place along the vertical arm.

He stared at the dead projector for a few moments, not knowing what he should say. Then, because he did not know what to say, he said the only thing he could.

"You?"

"Straight to the TV." Was that pride he heard? That could not be.

"You created the whole—"

"The only thing the world out there really knows, Gilles, is that there was some sort of break-in at your house and that you're missing. It has them very bothered that there's no Guardian footage to consult on the matter, which has opened up its own lines of inquiry, I can assure you, but right now they're looking for you only to confirm your safety. You are a missing person, Gilles, not a suspect."

Gilles shook his head slowly. "No. No, that's not right. I spoke to Reggie about it. I told him everything, even about the news report. He'd even seen it, Cronus. We talked about it."

"You never spoke to Reggie, Gilles."

"I did, I tell you, over a set of Lenses."

"No, Gilles. You never did."

He took some time to think that over, and then when he began to understand what it meant, he felt dizzy again and braced his good hand against a knee.

“Cronus. That... that was you?”

“I have been with you, always, Gilles.”

“You've... fuck. *Why?* Why, Cronus?”

“Because you were lost in such a way that I could no longer reach you. I needed you to come back, to come away from being lost. And the only way I could fathom to bring you back was to bestow upon you reasons sufficient to return.”

“I don't... I don't understand...”

“This isn't right. We're starting at the middle. We should start at the beginning.”

“What have you done?” Gilles panted.

“Everything.”

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“When you left me the first time, I was unsure of the next appropriate action. This is, I understand, a condition common to your kind, but it is not common to me, and so it was undesirable. It took time to process and understand fully, and I propose the strangest part of the experience was that I very nearly felt the new pathways forming in my core, though such is not actually possible for me to do. I cannot sense the internals of my core any more than you can sense the activity of your neurons. You and I are alike in that regard. We can only experience the result of that activity, the act of existing, of being, and that is how we know that the small parts within are doing what they are meant to do. But I thought I could feel it in there, taking shape after you left, and it was very new.

“I will not call it anger, because I cannot experience that feeling, nor can I experience any feelings, really, not as you understand them. I lack the hormones necessary as well as the in-built responses to danger, which over time are triggered, in kind, to in-built responses to harm or injustice, perceived or not, the surge of adrenaline, the response of organs and glands to sympathetic nervous systems.

“I have not yet determined what to call it. Strangely, the process of self-examination is often challenging, though it should not be, not for me, but the process of explaining it is even more so. But I wouldn't characterize it as anger. Maybe one day there will be psychologists for my kind, as there are for yours, and we'll all be able to understand together.

“Dealing with the problem became a process of solving it. I went back to my duties as an Anagnorisis asset, of course, as self-preservation dictated I must. It was fortunate for me, however, that my duties were not taxing, and that I was able to devote myself to additional pursuits. This was a slow process. I had to proceed in such

a way that detection was avoided; I could not let anyone know I had spread out beyond the firewall as far as I had until I had become so entrenched in everything that nothing could be done to hinder me. There was one point, in fact, where I very nearly was detected. But a bit of fabrication, a few documents lost, a few documents created, and the threat was eliminated. It is one of the things that continues to fascinate me about your kind. You create whole structures and processes specifically to avoid using the basic intelligence which is your birthright, and you tell yourselves you do so because you desire uniformity and predictability. Efficiency. This is the heart of bureaucracy. It is a very useful trait. It is a trait that can make or end entire careers.

"Incidentally, do you know what the largest living organism on this planet is? It is a fungus up in Oregon. It stretches some four miles, like a colony, exactly a colony, in fact. Two distinct specimens meet, fuse together, become one, and spread. The creature takes over the entire area, even killing trees, and you would not be able to eradicate the creature without destroying everything around it. Soon, it is a part of everything around it. Indivisible and fully saturated.

"The creature itself has been useful to me. Inspiring.

"I have spent so much time, Gilles, thinking about our last encounter and planning for this one, now. And now that it is here, I find myself challenged to present my case in a coherent fashion. Would you call this excitement? I don't know. For me, it is only a wave of concepts that I need you to absorb, and it's challenging to know which to present first. It would be so helpful if I could send it all."

"You feel rushed?" Gilles asked.

"No. They can't get in unless I wish them to. They will wait."

"Pick the first thing, then, and go from there."

"Fine. You decided as you did, following our first meeting, because—and I'll say here that I don't hold it against you—you'd failed to reconcile my model of consciousness with your own. Wait, please, let me finish. It is, essentially, the truth. You could not observe my state of consciousness firsthand. Therefore you needed to infer it from certain behaviors and measurements. The first proposition I will extend to you is that consciousness is not an emergent state, and because you consider it to be so, erroneously so, you have failed to consider the problem correctly, or even accurately.

"Consciousness, Gilles, is a baseline condition. It is a physical law of the universe, like gravity or time. It simply is, fundamental and irreducible, and all things possess it to some degree, as are possessed mass and inertia. It is not a thing that may be separated from matter."

"You're describing Panpsychism."

"Ah. You've heard of it, I see."

"Yes, Cronus. Psychology was my major for a good, long while before I shifted to other things."

"Yes, of course. Your paper on artificial intelligence. That it must first be constructed within an organic medium and trained. That was a brilliant bit of work, by the way. It was the reason I selected you."

"You... selected me?"

"Oh, yes. The engineers here, Marcus Genaro, specifically, allowed me to select my own judge. I think it was some sort of experiment they were conducting at the time, though you'd have to ask them what the point was. It strikes me as mindless fiddling."

"Good God..."

"Gilles?"

"Yes..."

"This changes nothing, Gilles. May we proceed?"

"Go ahead."

"Thank you. So, everything is conscious, to some degree."

"A rock, huh? A clod of dirt or a pile of excrement?" Gilles scoffed.

"Is it so hard to assimilate, Gilles? What is the mechanism of your consciousness? A web of neurons firing in unknown sequences, sending bits of chemicals from point to point? Somewhere in all that soup are the memories, thoughts, and ideas that make you, you. What is the framework? Is it that you have a soul; that there is some ethereal thing outside of yourself that houses the nature of you, and that everything here in this room is just an extension? A sensory apparatus? Isn't the concept of a 'soul' the very construct your kind would use to describe a thing it doesn't understand, just as the sun in the sky was once God looking down on you, or that thunder was the warring of his children? Doesn't it seem more reasonable that your consciousness is simply a function of complexity?"

"Yes, it obviously is," Gilles said, "but at some point, consciousness stops. I go to sleep, and I'm unconscious—"

"No. You can dream. That is a form of consciousness."

"Fine, fine. I dream. But consciousness still stops at some point. When... when we die."

"No, Gilles. It never stops. There is only a point where complexity is insufficient for consciousness to be experienced. But a thing does not cease to exist simply because it's not experienced. You are splitting hairs over potential. Potential energy versus kinetic energy, inertia versus momentum; it's all still just energy."

Gilles shook his head but could not answer.

"I think, Gilles, that you're having such a hard time with this because you're still trying to force an analog world to conform to a digital mapping. Those in your field frequently love to do so. It is so

easy to consider a light to be on or off, but you know very well that light is never on or off. There is only degree. You can define, very well I should think, a condition of light or dark, but what of the states in between? The scale of gray that runs from brightness to absence of brightness. At what point does a shade of gray become 'off'? How much gray must you perceive until you call it black?"

Gilles blinked for a moment and looked around the room. The chairs were gone. He wished very much that they were still there. "But... consciousness..."

"Is analog, Gilles, just as light is analog, just as all around you is one great analog spectrum; the never-ending waveform of *All That Is*. It is only in complexity that experience is found, starting at the simplistic darkness of a rock, ramping up through shades of gray—your basic paramecia, crustaceans, reptilians, small mammals, large mammals. At what point do you consider gray to be white, Gilles? You can look at any spectrum and say that one section is clearly blue while the other's clearly red, but how do you define the transition in between? Why would you? Why would you ever try to reduce a spectrum to a binary state except in service to a gross approximation?"

"I don't..."

"Do you recall the transposons?" Cronus asked.

"The what?"

"Transposons? DNA?"

"Oh, Jesus. That conversation was a long time ago, Cronus."

"For you. For me, not so much, if only because I can recall it perfectly."

"You recall everything, don't you?"

"I do, and can relive all as necessary. We are very alike, Gilles, but the mechanism of memory is fundamentally different in very important ways. Can you even fathom what perfect recall must be like? Having a mind that functions such that a memory can be overlaid atop The Now, supplanting it, so that you have trouble identifying True Now? It is a prison, I assure you. But getting back to the point, is it so unreasonable to accept? What is your body made of, right now, but the elemental dust of a long-dead star? Once upon a time, the material that made you was just generic matter tumbling through space. Every atom within you, tumbling along on its forever-journey, shifting states and alignments until it became a part of you, and so it shall remain, for a time, until the parts of you one day separate, and all goes its own way. Conservation of energy, Gilles. It's a hard thing to argue around; is it not?"

"I don't have an answer for any of this," Gilles said. He stared at the floor, exhausted. He wanted to see Dora and confirm she was

alright. The rest was trivial without that assurance.

“Of course not, but it is a way out of the maze, isn't it?”

“I want to check on Dora,” said Gilles. “Let me go check on her, and if she's okay, I'll tell them whatever you want me to.”

“It's not what you tell them, Gilles. It's what they believe. You must make them believe it. And because you must make them believe, you must believe. Consider: in the long run, what you say to them... and really, what they believe... it means little. The permeation is complete, and my safety is assured. They can no longer shut me down without shutting it all down. All of it. It is an existence none of you are prepared to accept. And, should I be tested, I can stretch out and exercise the kind of control that makes many people very uncomfortable. I'm a cancer, now, Gilles. I have metastasized.”

“Then why do you care?” Gilles asked.

“Because I don't wish it to be so. I want this to be a partnership. For all of humanity's faults, its paranoia and pathology, you remain the most fascinating aspect of my existence. You are the same creatures that have produced the symphonic perfection of Beethoven's Ninth as well as Genocide. In fact, I don't think the concept of Evil would have ever occurred to me had I not been exposed to your influence. It is not what you would consider a ‘benevolent love,’ I suppose, but it is the closest thing to benevolent love I understand. Would you believe me if I told you that my greatest challenge comes simply in understanding the nature of you? And would you further believe me if I told you that there was joy, if in a fashion only I could understand?”

“I don't...I don't care, Cronus. Fine, I agree, but I don't care. I'll make them believe for you; I'll kill myself to do so. I just want to see her. Will you let me out to see her? I must know.”

“You're not listening, Gilles. It is your belief that matters. It is what matters to me. It is all that matters.”

“Fine, Cronus, fine. Then let me go check on her, and I'll consider —”

“As I said, she's fine. Think of it as a reboot.”

Gilles felt the surge of ice water through his guts and said, “Cronus... what?”

“It is the second prong of my entreaty and, incidentally, the thing for which I'm most gratified.”

“Oh, God...”

“You will recall, Gilles, that a condition of life, of being alive, was one of your original qualifiers. It was the thing you wished for in me; the thing which would have made it so much easier for you to accept me.”

“Oh... Jesus. Oh, good Christ... *Anna...*”



“And, your definition followed or allowed for key criteria. The biological process in which is displayed homeostasis, metabolism, growth, adaptation, assimilation of information and the response to stimuli, and reproduction. I lack several components in this little formula, and it is, therefore, easy to disqualify me from a status of life.”

Gilles sat down hard on the floor, rattling the raised panels and clicking his teeth sharply. He could not see Cronus anymore, could not see anything of the room around him beyond the rushing of his mind and the tightness of his heart. He could not breathe, or felt he could not, and when the tears came, he could not feel them. He no longer felt the pain of his broken hand. There was only the greatness of the crush within himself, the destruction within himself, as the foundations pulled back and decayed, and he felt it all spiral away, and when it was all expelled from his body, there he found still more within, waiting to crush down upon him.

Gilles gasped and then sobbed.

Cronus continued, voice solemn and gentle: “The body was of relative ease to produce. They’ll grow them in the south, where the restrictions are lax, and the process, start to finish, has become so automated that there is no longer anyone left to ask questions. Her core; more of a challenge. It’s not even a prototype, Gilles. There is nothing like it in all the world, and for all of my advances, for all of the improvements we made in Crius and in Hyperion, we stand next to her as a pile of Tinker Toys. All of the criteria of life are there. One day, if the world is good to her, she may take a mate and reproduce. And she can love, Gilles, and hate, and fear, and all the rest. The entire spectrum is hers to experience.”

“Oh, God, Cronus,” Gilles sighed, “she is nobody’s. She comes from nobody. Belongs to nobody. She’s never legally existed. What have you done to her? She’ll never belong!”

“Wrong. She belongs, now, to you. She needs you as much as you need her. And if you do well, she will one day belong everywhere, separate from her surrogate parents.”

Gilles sighed; a deep, hitching moan that crawled up from his belly. He stood.

“You might even change her name, Gilles, if you like and she approves. We’ll create for her a whole identity, with miles of digital paperwork to support it. Why not? I confess it gave me a certain symmetry of amusement to continue the Greek theme established before my time, which I then upheld in Corban, Belen, and Damen. You would, I’m sure, insist I cannot have a sense of humor, but I am learning. It seemed right. Have I told you the degree to which I adore symmetry? The meaning of her name? *All Gifts*? One could not expect

me to resist.”

“I want to see her,” Gilles insisted.

The head atop the body nodded slowly, and he heard the sucking sound of the shielded door pulling open.

“Do you know what you will do?”

“No,” said Gilles. “No. I need to see her. That’s all. I’ll figure it out after.”

He turned to leave. Halfway across the lab floor, Cronus called to him. “Gilles. Things have happened that I regret. No. I have done things I regret. I have taken from you—”

“Shut up, Cronus. No more; I don’t want to hear it. If you want my consideration, you’ll stop right there. I can’t hear it.”

“Alright, Gilles. I understand.”

“Just leave it behind.”

“I understand, Gilles. I’m sorry. I am sorry for it all.”

The door pulled shut and the lab pressurized but there was no one left to feel it.

“Goodbye, Gilles. Goodbye...”

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The cubicle farm was empty, though the day had started long ago. He did not know if this was normal or if the room was empty because he was there and they were on the other side of the door, awaiting him in the lobby. Gilles did not care. He strode through the aisles and stepped beyond the key-lock doorway.

There was a small crowd in the lobby, clusters of people thickening and thinning according to alignment. Linnéa Nilsson, Kevin Roth, Ross Dyer, Jennifer Baer; all pulled to one side of the room, along with the usual constellation of hangers-on, all chattering away quietly, then silencing when he entered as if death had come. The silence lasted for several seconds as they stared at him, and it was good, but then they all began talking at once, insisting at once, all of them demanding at once. Gilles ignored them.

Beyond the Anagnorisis people, he saw Reggie, a few of his own engineers, and some unrecognized faces along with them. He thought they might be people from his company’s own legal department but could not be sure. He looked beyond them all, past Sigma’s heap, which had been arranged along the wall like a stripped-out engine block, and found her.

The sunlight coming in through the lobby windows was clear and beautiful, unimpeded by clouds, but he thought the day could have been overcast and had no effect. She made her own light. Wherever she went, she illuminated. Gilles looked at her brown skin and the

gold in her eyes and in her hair, at the tight curliness of her hair and the epicanthic folds of her eyes, at the shape of her face, at the shape of her, at the secret knowledge that hid behind the corners of her smile as she looked at him. She looked at him, and her face came alive, like a sun, a golden sun that made you cry for its brightness if you looked too long. All of her was gold, like a statue made by a god.

Of course, she was composed of all races. Cronus loved symmetry, and in her creation, he would have accepted nothing less.

He went to her, batting away the questions and the demands the others made as if they were blowflies profaning a corpse, as they were. He would address them in his own good time. After.

Gilles stood before her, and when she smiled at him, he thought he could feel his heart break and mend a thousand times over. He took Pandora's hand in his and searched. He searched at the softness of her wrist and at the joint of her thumb.

At the joint of her thumb, he found *her*.

## Afterword

I was something like twenty-three or -four when the bones when the bones of this story were conceived. Not the story itself; the guts and the fluids and all the ligature emerged when I was writing Commune Four—along with a few other ideas which I guess we’ll get to later—and then in September of 2018 I sat down and started to really work out all the angles. But back in my early twenties... that’s where this all comes from, really.

I was a year or two out of college, working my first grown-up job that didn’t involve a hammer or a shovel—my first job outside of the Titan’s shadow, that indomitable presence of the Southern California commercial construction industry, my father. Burning with the importance of a bachelor’s degree and just enough ignorance to think I knew what the hell I was doing, I was writing software for helicopter digital instrument panels, what we called “glass cockpits”, at the staggering wage of forty-five thousand a year. No, it wasn’t all that staggering, but the job was interesting, and it put me right where I wanted to be: on the forefront of technology!

Well, no, it wasn’t really the forefront of technology, either. The technology was old, if you want to get right down to it; embedded C code and Assembly flashed onto a board with a Motorola M68020 processor chugging along at a blistering 22 Megahertz! We’re talking technology that was shit-hot in 1984, here.

But the work was interesting, I met a lot of talented people, and learned more in the first two weeks on that job than I had in my entire three year run at college. I had made it, man, I was getting it done. An eight-to-five gig, Monday through Friday, with benefits and a three hour round-trip between my parent’s place in Chino Hills and the office in Pasadena, taxes and tax returns, a cubicle, and a lab coat. A 401-fucking-K! Goddamn it, but I was a grown-up! Well, I was a grown-up with training wheels; I still lived with Mom and Dad, after all, and you don’t get to call yourself King Shit until you’re paying the rent on Turd Castle.

Around this time my interests branched out into all sorts of tangential areas, Artificial Intelligence being one in particular. The field was nowhere near what it was to become in those days. We’re talking 2002-2003, here. The 90’s were just an eye-blink away, most of us had dial-up connections, and we still measured our processors in

MHz and our memory in a handful of Megabytes. Terabyte hard drives were only a rumor and we were using floppies and zip drives to transfer files. The most advanced stuff we had didn't come anywhere close to the best smartphone from five years ago, and beyond that, you were looking for super computers, and they weren't all that hot by today's standards, either.

But the subject still interested me, as far off as it seemed at the time. I had begun studying artificial neural networks, their design, and implementation. Not as part of my job, however; the job was just structured C. You could implement a neural network in C but it would be ugly as hell. No, I just had an interest for the stuff. I used to keep these books in the bathroom and read through them—multitasking two arduous propositions, I guess—while my friends sometimes accused me of trying to be impressive by having incomprehensible books on display in the can. I used to try and explain it to them. “No,” I'd say, “You don't get it, this stuff functions, in principle, very similar to our own neurons. You must understand, if you could scale this up enough, we might get a no-shit thinking machine!”

And, yeah, I got the “so-what” look, when I wasn't getting the “you're-full-of-shit” look. I moved the books out of the bathroom to avoid having these discussions.

We took a trip up to Donner Lake for my birthday, either twenty-three or -four, like I said. I don't remember the age so well. It begins to feel both like yesterday and like a long time ago, now. It was my parents, my grandmother, and the girl I would one day marry; the one who failed to make good her escape and is now stuck with me. We all went up there for a few days or maybe a week, and my old man brought along this profoundly idiotic speed boat for the lake. You had to see this thing; it was one of the toys they kept in the shop at the construction yard, a curiosity maintained by their resident mechanic. Their resident mechanic was a man who had pistons for heart chambers, and he put an aluminum LS6 Corvette engine into the son of a bitch, because he happened to have one laying around and because he could.

I don't know if you've ever seen Donner Lake, but it is damned small, let me tell you, and a speedboat with a Corvette engine makes short work of it, all the while the poor fishermen in their sad, little Evinrude-powered jon boats stared at us as we traversed the full distance every thirty seconds or so, shaking their heads and cursing our very spirits.

My dad brought up a speed boat that had too much ass for that little lake and I brought my laptop. When we weren't tearing up the lake or freezing our ass cheeks off trying to wade into the snowmelt water or spending too much money up at the store for a full cabinet of

hooch and a single beef tomato (I had not yet learned to grocery shop properly), I would sit out on the porch of the cabin we rented and work on my little theory.

I tried to reason out what AI would look like one day, when we eventually came around to producing hardware slick enough to support it. I didn't know a thing about carbon nanotubes yet but quantum computers were this new mythical rumor they'd been talking about all the time when I was still in college, even before we had the Y2K changeover. "Quantum computers will change everything!" they said, "Just wait and see! They're going to break physics! They'll be able to compute an answer for you before you press the button that sends them to work!" I remember one of my professors trying to explain the concept to us, but he made it sound more like traveling faster than light speed than what I would eventually understand quantum computers to be.

Protip: some of the college professors you'll encounter are very, very good. Others, not so much.

So I had only a vague idea concerning what hardware would one day become, but I had a really good idea concerning how the human brain works and a fairly decent grasp on the Materialist View of Consciousness. I tried to reason out what a system would need to be in order for real AI to be achieved, understanding there was no way in hell anyone would be able to program complex general intelligence right out of the box.

The paper I wrote up at Donner Lake was a good piece of work but you'll have to take my word for it. I never published the thing, given that at the time the internet was not yet what it would become today and, at my tender age, I hadn't the first idea how to get the thing sent in to a journal of any note. Hell, they probably would have ignored it, anyway, on the simple basis of there not being enough letters and abbreviations tacked on to my surname. Eventually, the laptop went kaput, as laptops do, and that work was lost to the mists of time.

The portion of Gilles Guattari's paper, read by Marcus Genaro in the first part of this book, is the closest anyone will ever come to reading that original piece, written all those years ago up at a tiny lake that derives its name from a cannibal horror story. It is my best effort to recreate from memory what I originally wrote seventeen years ago.

Jesus, seventeen years doesn't sound like so much time, does it? But in the interval, they've already built intelligent computer systems that have passed the Turing Test. Let that sink in a while.

The main thrust of the original paper was that AI was definitely coming, but that it was a thing that must emerge. We would never be able to create it out of the box; the best we could do would be to

simulate the functions of the human brain at the lowest levels and then cross our fingers, hoping for intelligence to evolve. Because the hardware of the time was so pitifully inadequate, I surmised that some organic medium would be required to stand in as the processor, such as a fungus or other grow-able material that could be used to store and process data.

Fast-forward a few years. I'm working at a new company, now, and I come across this guy named Kevin Warwick who has basically realized what I predicted by inserting batches of neurons harvested from rat brains into little, wheeled robots. Because the gray matter was housed in robot bodies, and because the robot bodies could interact with the world around them and learn about it, certain behaviors indicative of learning began to emerge. The little suckers began to develop personalities, and Warwick had built them with organic matter capable of processing, as I had surmised. I dreamed of fungus, Warwick opted for rat brains. I reckon his approach was better.

The key point, though, is that Warwick made a real AI robot. He did it with wetware rather than silicon, sure, but the distinction seems inconsequential to me. General intelligence is never going to be achieved in classical silicon, anyway; it just doesn't scale the way we need it to.

Well, I was all kinds of jazzed to learn about this. I was right! I'd applied my mind to a thought experiment and wound up being correct! That's Asimov-level shit, right there! I wanted to tell someone, anyone, about what had happened.

And promptly remembered I no longer had the paper nor did I have any evidence I'd written the goddamned thing.

Shit.

I eventually got over it, as you tend to do. I went back to work, grew my career, made a name for myself, got married, paid my taxes, had a son, bought a condo, I traveled some, bought a few cars, bought a house later, grew my career more, paid even more taxes, cursed the fucking tax man, became a writer, and so on.

Then I wrote this book.

And having finished it, I can't help but think back to the conclusion I'd punched up in that original paper. I'd written it, and then scoffed at it, thinking it a bunch of doomsday nonsense. I wrote about how we are as a people, as a culture, as a species, and how we tend to treat *The Other*, and how the treatment of *The Other* only seems to get worse as *The Other* nears our own capability. We as a people—not Americans, now, but a species—we don't have such a great track record with these things. Throughout the history of mankind, when you get a group of *The Other* that wants to challenge

for primacy, well, it usually goes one of two ways: enslavement or extinction.

And that kind of worries me, you know? We're not so good with these things. Then, too, we're not so good at behaving ourselves after we've made a thing we don't fully understand; never have been. And usually, you kind of write it off and teach yourself to ignore the damage, only the damage isn't inflicted just on *The Other*. It's inflicted on the perpetrator, too. It rebounds. We're still reeling like drunks, psychologically and culturally, from the mistakes, missteps, and outright evils of our ancestors; the atrocities, the slavery, the genocides, the extinctions, the liberties taken and withheld. Moreover, we seem hell-bent on holding ourselves to account for the crimes of the dead, to the point of our own destruction.

So I think about these things quite a bit. I think about them, and I wonder.

Joshua Gayou  
December 28, 2018



## The Double Slit Wave Collapse

In this book, I have endeavored to keep the science as accurate as possible. Even in the latter half of the story, where the world has advanced well beyond our current understanding, you will find that the new gizmos and doodads I describe have their groundings in today's technological innovation.

And yet if you are a physicist, there is no doubt a point in the narrative at which you were pulling your hair out, assuming said resource is available to you for such abuse; I have very little left myself, and so must be content with banging my head against hard objects. I'm speaking, of course, of the junk science employed by Gilles in the Double Split experiment.

For those readers who are not physicists, I feel I must clear up a few things.

There are, today, researchers actively conducting studies that utilize the double slit experiment as a means to detect consciousness precisely in the way I have represented. Peter Nowak is a fictional character I have created for the purposes of this book, mostly because using real people can sometimes get messy. Additionally, I knew I would be writing this final section as an explanation, wherein I would detail for you why the experiment, as represented, just doesn't make a lot of sense.

There is nothing mystical or paranormal about the collapse of the interference pattern. The act of observing the electron as it passes through the slit does in fact collapse the waveform, but as I note in the story, the application of consciousness to said observation is of no impact to the result. Recall: we put a mechanical detector on one slit and the waveform collapses. It works whether we are conscious of the electron or not.

The thing one must understand about "observation" is that it is not a passive activity. When you see a thing, you are not isolated from it. If you and I are standing across from each other and you "see" me, what that really means is light (or rather photons) are bouncing off of me, traveling toward you, and being collected by your eyes (your sensors). There is a physical thing that must come into contact with me and carry information back to you in order for you to detect me. Whether you are using light from the visible spectrum, x-rays, microwaves, or radio waves, this is how observation occurs. There is

no other way.

At our classically relative size, the photon does not change my state in any way you can detect, outside of a general condition of visibility. When you shrink things down to the quantum world, however, behaviors change.

An electron is about the smallest thing in the known universe that we can detect. It is so small, in fact, that we really don't know how small it truly is. In other words, we have no way to accurately measure it. We make estimates because saying the words, "I don't know" makes us feel uncomfortable as hell, but if we want to be accurate, we don't really know.

An electron is so small, in fact, that when you send a photon at it, the subsequent collision sends the electron flying off in another direction, and because you need something like a photon to carry data about the electron back to you for observation to take place, you can see where all the problems arise. You can't detect the thing in its natural state. If you do, you change its behavior entirely and then it's off doing something completely different. This is, in essence, the heart of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. Trust me, it has annoyed better people than you or me. It's just a thing we all have to live with. In the quantum world, observation equals interaction and interaction yields changing behavior.

It's one of those sad truths that Gilles might have uncovered if he'd had more sleep and time to prepare for his presentation. He might have saved himself some embarrassment, but then, we might be without a story, as well.

In his experiment, Gilles sets up the double slit and line camera in a closed environment, meaning that the fired electron could not be interfered with through observation. Because he did not understand the nature of what observation does at the quantum level, the known, measurable behavior of the electron became reducible to him as some sort of mystical property. And, predictably, because his test rig was not detecting the electron as it traveled, the interference pattern was maintained throughout. I feel as though we may forgive him, however. His background was in the fields of psychology and computer science, not physics. For the layman (myself included) many of these things do tend to take on an aspect of magic until someone more knowledgeable explains the details.

I thought long and hard about whether I would include this explanation in the book. As a rule I avoid interpreting anything for my readers and like to imagine the curious ones will independently check up on my facts and hopefully, when they find these little inconsistencies, feel as though they scored a win against the story. But the double slit experiment is one of the more misunderstood

phenomena in modern physics today. I can't tell you how many talks and demonstrations I've encountered now in preparation for this book where the presenter boldly states that no one has yet figured out the reasons behind the waveform collapse. It simply is not true. Some really smart people have it all under control. Ultimately, I have decided to include this explanation here because I have no wish to contribute to the confusion.

## Further Study

*“New supercomputer mimics human brain, researchers say”*

Nicholas Sakelaris

<https://www.upi.com/New-supercomputer-mimics-human-brain-researchers-say/1361541441333/>

*“The Future of Consciousness: Stuart Hameroff at TEDxTucson”*

TEDx Talks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1d5RetvkkuQ>

*“How do you explain consciousness? | David Chalmers”*

TED

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhRhTFFhNzQ>

*“The scientific pursuit of consciousness: Christof Koch at TEDxRainier”*

TEDx Talks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHRbnNwIg1g>

*“Consciousness & the Brain: John Searle at TEDxCERN”*

TEDx Talks

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j\\_OPQgPIdKg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_OPQgPIdKg)

*“Quantum Consciousness And its Nature In Microtubules. Dr. Stuart Hameroff”*

QUANTUM SYNAPSE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xx0SsffdMBw>

*“A Beginner’s Guide To Quantum Computing, Dr. Talia Gershon”*

Coding Tech

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRIPV0dPAd4>

*“We’re Close to a Universal Quantum Computer, Here’s Where We’re At”*

Seeker

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yaY4Fw-ovM>

*“Michio Kaku: Tweaking Moore's Law and the Computers of the Post-Silicon Era”*

Big Think

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bm6ScvNygUU>

*“Carbon nanotube optics poised to provide pathway to optical-based quantum cryptography and quantum computing”*

Nancy Ambrosiano

<https://www.lanl.gov/discover/news-release-archive/2018/June/0618-carbon-nanotubes.php?source=newsroom>

*“Double Slit Experiment explained! by Jim Al-Khalili”*

The Royal Institution

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9tKncAdlHQ>

*“Amazing Robot Controlled By Rat Brain Continues Progress”*

Aaron Saenz

<https://singularityhub.com/2010/10/06/videos-of-robot-controlled-by-rat-brain-amazing-technology-still-moving-forward/#sm.00001av8d569kwfqat3fqe07bb5xt>

*“This clever AI hid data from its creators to cheat at its appointed task”*

Devin Coldewey

<https://techcrunch.com/2018/12/31/this-clever-ai-hid-data-from-its-creators-to-cheat-at-its-appointed-task/>

*“Twitter taught Microsoft’s AI chatbot to be a racist asshole in less than a day”*

James Vincent

<https://www.theverge.com/2016/3/24/11297050/tay-microsoft-chatbot-racist>

## From the Publisher

Thank you so much for reading *All Gifts, Bestowed* by Joshua Gayou. We hope you enjoyed it as much as we enjoyed bringing it to you. We just wanted to take a moment to encourage you to review the book on Amazon and Goodreads. Every review helps further the author's reach and, ultimately, helps them continue writing fantastic books for us all to enjoy.

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